

“Alcestis and Evadne, Phaedra and Iphigenia: ψυχῆς οὐδέν ἐστι τιμιώτερον—or Not?”

Euripides’ female characters named above bring death upon themselves because of values higher than their survival. Each has distinctive aims in dying—all based on φιλία. Posthumous κλέος in three cases, avoidance of infamy in Phaedra’s, are aims. Each has individual experience of ἔρωσ.

The Greek in my title is not Platonic but from *Alc.* 301, its noun’s application hardly Socratic.

In backstory **Alcestis** had brought on her own death when she declared herself willing, alone among her husband φίλοι, to satisfy the sole condition of Apollo’s special deal with the Fates: Admetus’ imminent death would be deferred should he find a voluntary substitute. Combining suicide with cremation **Evadne** jumps onto the blazing pyre of husband Capaneus, lightning-blasted when the Seven attacked Thebes. Leaving a deceitful suicide note to explain, **Phaedra** hangs herself as married women shamed and sullied by rape or seduction were expected to do. After anguished reluctance **Iphigenia** declares herself willing, even eager to die at Artemis’ demand and altar.

“Sacrificial” deaths, therefore?

To compare/contrast what Mrs Admetus does with decisions of Agamemnon’s daughter and other victims of explicit human sacrifice **Alcestis** is often associated with **Iphigenia**: Macaria dies to save other *Children of Heracles*; in *Phoenician Women* Creon’s son Menoeceus does so saving Thebes; in a fragmentary play Erechtheus’ daughters save Athens; and **Iphigenia**, long resisting her dreadful fate, consents to be slain, ostensibly in order to “save” Hellas from barbarian predation and domination; however, she realizes that the ἔρωσ-driven Achaean host would

slaughter her and all her φίλοι, baby Orestes included, did not Agamemnon and, at last, she acquiesce in her ritual slaying.

That **Alcestis**, **Evadne**, and **Iphigenia** regard Achilles-like κλέος as more precious than living as humble, ordinary wives needs little argument: *Alc.* 323-25 (see chorus at 150f); *Supp.* 1015, 1059-61, 1067; *IA* 1375f, 1440-44). Glory for **Phaedra**'s sons, further shame on her *house* avoided, is her desire: *Hipp.* 717-19 as against 337-41. Indeed Artemis praises her γενναιότης in nobly trying to defeat Aphrodite (1300-1305 and 1429f; cf. chorus at 773-75).

Alcestis surrenders ψυχή, she proclaims, so that her husband may live—a royal widower, to become father-*and-mother* to their children. At the point of dying she exacts Admetus' vow, with male chorus as witnesses, not to remarry and so subject their children to a notoriously dangerous stepmother. In contrast, **Evadne** has no concern about *living* φίλοι. Despite her loving father Iphis' pleas she bereaves him, pathetically failing to prevent her fiery death, and ignores the very existence of her young and soon to be 100% orphaned *son* named Sthenelus in the *Iliad* (cf. the *Alcestis*' anonymous boy Eumelus). **Phaedra**, on the other hand, initially intended to starve herself to death with single purpose. i.e., to quell unshakable, divinely inflicted passion, then changes her mode of death and accelerates it for *three* new goals: to punish Hippolytus for his violent slander, to defend that fidelity to his father Theseus which her stepson vociferously impugned, and to insure that Theseus know his two little sons *are* in fact *his*. **Iphigenia** prevents deaths of φίλοι and sort-of-fiancé. Φιλία!

Ἔρωσ: Surely ἔρωσ had moved **Alcestis** to volunteer to die in Admetus' stead (*Alc.* 282f), whether or not *he* could have vetoed this or *she herself* might have rescinded the offer before the death-day that *Alcestis* dramatizes. (If *Alcestis* doomed herself *before* bearing children, her thinking expressed at *Alc.* 287-989 indicates further motivation for her decision in the meantime.)

Two Italian commentators suggest that reported off-stage business at and about her marriage bed (*λέχος*: *Alc.* 175-188) suggests her enjoyment of sex and jealousy of any other female who may take her place there. None ever will, if *she* can prevent it! Sensing this very anxiety does Admetus promise that controversial life-size facsimile of her which will indeed hold her place in their bed (348-54). Certainly **Evadne**'s shocking self-immolation is motivated in large part by *married love*. Her wish to be forever with Capaneus resembles Laodameia's vis-à-vis Protesilaus in a fragmentary play, *εἶδωλον* and all. Though Evadne doesn't mention *ἔρωσ*, Iphis does (*Supp.* 1040, in a bold participle). Ostinato of *γαμ-* words as she joyfully remembers her wedding makes her motivation clear (*Supp.* 995, 998, 1025, 1029). The decisive factor that reverses **Iphigenia**'s feelings about sacrifice is not that, delaying it, she will doom her entire family, here or at Argos (*IA* 1376 and 1395-99 and beyond), but that dashing, valiant hero Achilles would die trying to save her for actual nuptials—making Agamemnon's falsehood true! After a fashion, **Phaedra** nobly defeated such shameful *ἔρωσ* as disgraced her mother and sister.

Evading death Admetus “found” his savior Alcestis. She and three sisters-in-*ἀρετή* found something more compelling than *ψυχή*: *φιλία*, *κλέος*, and (in one case resisting it) *ἔρωσ*.