# Teaching Euripides' 'Alcestis' through performance context

In recent years, scholarship has become more aware of the importance of considering performativity in interpreting meaning in Ancient Greek drama. However, in the classroom, I fear that the "text" is still the main medium through which students interpret meaning. I believe that this approach, although valuable, discounts the ancient audience's reception and runs the risk of making something exciting appear "dull". I suggest that, in class, through experimentation with pencil, paper, and imagination, students can enliven the performance and perceive new meaning, thus making the learning process more interactive and thought-provoking. I used Euripides' *Alcestis* as a case study.

I recently conducted a class project in a Drama class wherein I asked the students to reconsider their own preconceived ideas about Euripides' *Alcestis* with a clearer picture of how the play could have been acted out, especially in consideration of the symbolic use of space in Euripides. When students, in my experience, first read the *Alcestis*, they read the numerous invocations of Alcestis' "excellence" and assume that Euripides is uplifting a female character to a level of heroism usually reserved for warriors on the Homeric battlefield. However, was the audience meant to include such heroism in the family's tragedy, Admetus' loss of the "best of wives", or to perceive irony through production that ultimately effaces Alcestis' heroic achievement? How would the play's production persuade the audience's interpretation of the final scene when Heracles returns Alcestis to Admetus? How would it persuade my students'?

To respond to this dilemma, at the very start of class, I asked pointed questions to initially break them free from the text: From where do the actors enter onstage, and what is the fabric of the chorus? The teacher could direct conversation with a couple secondary readings. Lloyd's

(2012) discussion of Euripides' symbolic use of space relates Admetus' perceived submissiveness to Alcestis since he enters through the *skene* door. Foley's (2003) article on choral identity demonstrates the oddity of having a male chorus function as the visible group leading the lament. Without going further, the students already noticed an inversion of typical gender roles that needed to be set straight. Then, I asked, is Alcestis' character a benign extension of the female interior into the exterior or transgressive? This question helped them traverse the tension between male and female spheres that unraveled next, and to be honest, they gave me some new ideas as well.

This basic setup led to creative set designs that I will share. Through staging and the use of space, costume, props, and music, students rethought how actors interacted with one another to create meaning. I broke the students up into groups, and I assigned each group one of two scenes to "produce" on paper, considering total performance: (1) Alcestis' death onstage and (2) her *ekphora*, with the scene of Admetus and Pheres arguing. Students, then, considered their groups' productions among three key scenes, all centering on Heracles: Heracles' arrival and request for hospitality, Heracles' drunken conversation with the male houseslave, and Heracles' return from Alcestis' tomb, having just wrestled Death. With a little teacher guidance during presentation stage, including images of the theater and daily life, the outcome was successful. Students mapped out how they perceived space shifting between polar controls: female and male. They learned how the household, behind the *skene*, evolves like a character throughout the play (Luschnig-2018), and how the male and female spheres compete on- and off-stage (Segal-1992). They watched as props encoded with gender imbued the space with typically feminine or masculine energy. They listened to the music as Heracles' personal symposium butted up against feminine mourning.

Students certainly saw the importance of total performance to better understand ancient plays, but, also, this exercise problematized a desired singular interpretation of the play's ending. However, I do not see this as a negative, but as an opportunity. We can never know the author's true intention. Students, also, importantly recognized that spectacle, what Aristotle labeled *opsis* and then neglected, truly affected what the audience was meant to track and understand. Overall, I was pleased with how excited students were to "produce" their own scenes to present to the class and how several said: "I never thought of that before". I would also demonstrate that a similar lesson could be created for any drama provided that the production theme and question are presented beforehand.

## Works Cited


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