

## Does Euripides Have a Consistent Weltanschauung?

Though it has been argued that Euripides “sets out to do something different in every work that he creates” (Morewood, 1), I submit that Euripides evinces a consistent *Weltanschauung* that can be extracted from *Alcestis*, his earliest extant tragedy, as well as the *Bacchae*, his last work.

The key theme that underlies his worldview by reviewing his variety of views on the nature of “wisdom” expressed by different characters.

The events of the *Bacchae* evoke, not so much intellectual insight at first, but rather emotions of horror followed by depression, in fact pity and fear as Aristotle demands in his definition of tragedy in the sixth book of the *Poetics*. The horror is the result of Euripides’ skillful mounting of tension throughout the play from the first soliloquy of Dionysus in which the god very plainly warns that he is going to show Pentheus and the whole Theban land that he is god, through the mocking of Pentheus and the *σπαραγμός* of the cattle to the final and ultimate horror of Pentheus’ murder at the hands of his mother and the maenads. But then Euripides manipulates his audience with as much power as Dionysus has shown over Pentheus. For in the finale of the play, the dramatist presents the scenes of a father tenderly bringing his frenzied daughter to her senses and to a realization of what she has done. Thus depression follows as a result of the final dialogue.

Throughout the play Euripides has various characters define “wisdom.” In fact, I will demonstrate that “the tension which is dramatically developed between the right and wrong kinds of understanding is basic to the meaning of the play” (Conacher, 73).

In contrast to this dark and hopeless play stands the *Alcestis*. This play concerns a man named Admetus who has a chance to escape death by finding someone willing to take his place.

Alcestis, his wife, volunteers to preserve the honor and dignity of her marriage and her family. When she dies, though, Heracles rescues her from Death to pay back his debt to his host under the custom of *ξενία*, hospitality.

This play lacks the emotional impact and power of the *Bacchae* but is just as difficult to reduce to a basic theme. In contrast to the *Bacchae*, the humans in this play have a rewarding association with the gods, and all things end happily.

Despite this problem, I find a theme in the *Alcestis* directly related to the *Bacchae*. For just as Pentheus was on top of life as king of Thebes, and lost sight of his limitations and place in the universe, so Admetus, king of Thessaly, seems to be so caught up in his good fortune that he had forgotten that he was mere man. Even his name Ἄδμητος means “unconquered one.” But Admetus learned his lesson cheaply. For although he does come to the realization that he is only a man and cannot be invincible (1.1065, “I am beaten...”), he does get his wife back.

*Alcestis* is probably the earliest extant play of Euripides. It is this fact that makes the play appear so “non-Euripidean.” The enormous impact of such forces as the Peloponnesian War and the Sophistic Movement have not yet contributed to the later Euripidean attitudes of pessimism and skepticism as well as his concentration on the psychological, political and religious aspects of man. But the seeds are there in the *Alcestis* which has already begun to deny a universe ruled by reason. It only takes incidents such as the exile of Anaxagoras and Protagoras, the Melian massacre, the Sicilian Disaster and the skillful use of sophistic principles by such men as Perikles and Alcibiades in the political realm to develop the attitudes and concerns expressed in the *Bacchae* which he wrote in a self-imposed exile.

Still, although the play is very non-Euripidean in almost all aspects, it does show the beginnings of the Euripidean worldview in that the human life is ruled by τύχη. Heracles stated,

“call life you live your own, but the other things of chance: (1.789). “Evidence suggests that Euripides belonged to a circle of intellectuals who actively questioned accepted views of religion” (Stuttard, 5). The gods may exist, but you cannot count on them. Therefore live as if they did not exist, expecting nothing. So, indeed, the same morale of the chorus that ends the *Bacchae* ends the *Alcestis*: “And the things that are expected are not accomplished, and god finds a way for unexpected things.” This accords with modern humanism where focuses on flourishing without depending on divine beings.

### Bibliography

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