

The Democracy of Death: Criticism of elite Orphic ideology in Euripides' *Alcestis*

This paper argues that Euripides' *Alcestis* reflects a populist critique of fifth century BCE elite claims to a better afterlife, particularly one gained through expensive initiatory rites. Euripides instead highlights the commonality of death and its leveling of status as a core value of the Athenian democracy.

Euripides places this programmatic critique at the center of the prologue (ll. 1-76). Eschewing traditional iconography, he transforms Thanatos into a democratically appointed priest who presents the view of the radical *demos* through his odd priestly garb, halting language, court-room idiom, and ideology of radical social equality (cf. Parker 2007). Contrarily, Apollo becomes paired not just with the expected ideology of aristocratic high culture (6-10, 22-23) but also with an initiatory philosophy wherein status and money buy better treatment in the afterlife (57, 966-701). The conflict between these two views of death introduces a major philosophical.

This concern is central to the entire play, as demonstrated by analyzing the frequent mentions of 'Orphic' ideology and symbolism by the elite, particularly Apollo's surrogate Admetus and Herakles (eg. 344-365 but cf. Assaël 2016). Counteracting that are the views of the low-register characters, who argue for equality in death. For instance, the female servant shows how, in death, Alcestis disregards status differentiators (193-195), the male servant rebukes Heracles' attempts to make death high status (769-770, 825), and Heracles rejects associating his rescue with initiatory rites (ln. 1128). This is then added to the consistent attempts of the chorus to present death as a shared, democratic experience (744-746, 895, 931-932, 973-975, 989-990).

The paper concludes by considering the way that these two philosophies attempt to contextualize the death of Alcestis herself: either as a nameless corpse whose funeral serves as

display of elite status or as a hero who sacrifices herself and is honored with communal worship – a form of afterlife compatible with democratic ideals (926-1006, cf. Slater 2000).

This work builds on those on those scholars who explore *Alcestis* through the lens of Orphic cults (Markanatos 2013, de Jáuregui 2016). It also offers a rebuttal to some recent scholars who see a sympathetic depiction of Orphic symbolism as the key to the play (Assaël 2016) and argues for a more careful distinction to be made between egalitarian Eleusian ideology and the Orphic visions of the afterlife (eg. Markanatos 2013).

Importantly, this paper provides a corrective to the idea that initiatory cults were associated with the lower classes and suggests that their acceptance was pervasive among the elites (Burkert 1977). This paper also ultimately suggests this “criticism from below” and focus on the democratic view of low-register characters may help both to explain the play’s anomalous fourth position and the ambiguity of the ending “resurrection” of *Alcestis* (cf. Stieber 1998).

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