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Euripides' *Alcestis*. Oklahoma Series in Classical Culture

Euripides., C. A. E. Luschnig, Hanna Roisman, *Euripides' Alcestis. Oklahoma series in classical culture* ; v. 29. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003. xv, 284 pages : illustrations ; 24 cm.. ISBN 0806134585 \$24.95 (pb).

Review by

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Luschnig and Roisman's new student edition of *Alcestis* admirably fills a substantial void in the range of texts for the second-year Greek curriculum, furthering a welcome trend in classics publications that are pitched to the needs of today's university students in North America.

The teacher seeking appropriate texts for first-year Greek has for some time had an abundance of real options to suit his or her beliefs about language pedagogy, but not necessarily for that crucial second year, where students can easily flail in the transition from textbook to texts. I hope the publishers of this journal will not object too strongly if I suggest here that the Bryn Mawr Classical Commentaries often do not provide enough support for the typical student in a third or fourth semester class. The Cambridge "Green and Gold" commentaries are fine for the third year, or for a particularly able group of second-year students, but they do expect much, perhaps too much, for this less advanced group. On the other hand, the University of Oklahoma Press has kept alive the old Barbour edition of Herodotus (though it could use some updating) and more recently has resuscitated Benner's valuable student edition of the *Iliad*. Indeed, it has appeared at times as if old texts like Benner's, originally pitched at school students (when school students more commonly learned Greek), might be the wave of the future; Duckworth has performed a valuable service in reprinting such editions for its BCP series. Moreover, the same press has produced Malcolm Campbell's newer handy four-volume series of brief Greek prose texts, which, to my thinking, provides an almost ideal amount of support for students who have learned the basics of the Greek language. But since Greek drama can occupy a pivotal role in this curriculum, the absence of a suitable edition (save, perhaps Elliott's Oxford *Medea*) for students early in their careers has been a drawback for teachers who would like their students to read one of the easier texts in the Euripidean canon, and *Alcestis*, for both linguistic and thematic reasons, is an ideal choice for a new student edition. And this edition in particular could

serve as an ideal complement to Campbell's for second-year Greek courses; I can easily envision a stimulating semester in which students read first Lysias' *On the Murder of Eratosthenes* and then *Alcestis*.

Luschnig and Roisman provide a wide range of support materials for the text, all of which are motivated by their sensible conclusion that students reading this text may be beginners at Greek literature, but are also likely advanced undergraduates who may never read another Greek drama. Their goal is not just that the students understand the Greek, but that they think about the drama. The brief but informative introduction includes information on the date of the play, the hypotheses (in English), *Alcestis* as a satyr play, the characters, basic matters of staging and meter. At the rear of the volume are a detailed bibliography and vocabulary. I would have preferred no vocabulary since I value dictionary work, but I can understand the reasoning behind including the list. Words occurring more than five times are highlighted in bold. The text itself is mainly Murray's, though with a few changes in punctuation and stichometry; while there is no apparatus, the commentary does note places where there are significant textual controversies (e.g. on lines 636-9). The font itself is large enough to read without undue eyestrain. The support in the commentary is full and judicious. It includes review materials on matters of grammar and morphology, thus relieving instructors from that burden, as well as detailed references to other works of Greek literature, presumably to entice students to read more; the extended sidetrack to *Frogs* on page 96 is otherwise inexplicable. I like how the odes are translated and laid out on the page with strophe next to, not above, antistrophe, so students can see the relationship between them. A symbol is used to highlight words and concepts of especial importance. I also very much like the attention paid to how meter helps us understand meaning and character.

I do have two concerns about the Commentary. First, there are numerous instances where the sole comment on a line is a definition of a word, usually the exact same definition as in the vocabulary a few pages later, thus making the note superfluous (e.g. on *nosos* at 885); the Commentary thus looks padded. Second, there are instances where interpretation creeps too much into the Commentary; for instance, in a note on line 513, we are told that Admetus will be "ogling" the woman Heracles has just brought to him. Such a judgmental term will prejudice the student and detract from her own independent assessment of Admetus' conduct.

Unique to this volume is the Discussions section, which engages the major interpretive concerns and controversies with the individual contributions of Luschnig and Roisman clearly marked (or at least I think they are so). Luschnig's comments tend to focus on *Alcestis*, while Roisman is more concerned with Admetus. The discussions proceed through each episode sequentially, first raising questions to guide the thinking of students before (one hopes) they read the authors' comments. While the authors provide many interesting and provocative comments on the characters and plot, students might have been better served if the discussions of this drama were placed in the context of larger controversies concerning Euripides and the major schools of Euripidean interpretation.¹ That would give the authors' comments a clearer interpretive framework and allow students to make up their own mind about Euripides.

Early on, for example, (p. 164) we are asked to consider the nature and character of Admetus, with Luschnig taking a brief, moderately positive position on Admetus and Roisman extensively criticizing his conduct, not just on p. 165, but throughout the Discussions. Indeed, despite the authors' stated desire for a balanced dialogue, the treatment of Admetus is almost uniformly dismissive, while Alcestis receives rapturous praise. Even though the treatment of Admetus resembles my own reading to some extent, I would be much more comfortable, for a volume such as thus, with a strongly stated critical condemnation of Admetus if the contrary side were given adequate exposure; surely at least a quick summary of, say, Anne Burnett's defense of the virtues of Admetus is in order.² Balance is even more important because any modern reader of this drama is drawn so quickly to Alcestis and repelled so thoroughly by Admetus. I thus suggest that better pedagogy would be to explore more thoroughly a defense of Admetus. The authors begin the Discussions as a whole with the observation that "The Alcestis is one of the most controversial of Greek plays," yet the most important scholarly controversies are confined too much to footnotes, or not given sufficient space to allow students to see what is, in fact, controversial. I should note that the discussion of the staging of the Prologue does in fact detail the specific points of scholarly disagreement, and this examination is thus particularly successful.

The physical quality of the book is high. It would take a determined and strong student to break its spine. And I can find only one error; "Almetus" for "Admetus" near the end of page 180.

Luschnig and Roisman do thus quite successfully meet their goals. This is a thoughtful, carefully prepared and well-planned introduction to reading Greek drama in Greek. The teacher who uses this volume in a class need only be careful to supplement the interpretive material so that students can decide for themselves about Admetus.

Notes

1. The divergent strains in Euripidean criticism are clearly discussed in Ann N Michelini, "Euripides: Conformist, Deviant, Neo-conservative." *Arion* 4.3 (1997) 208-22.

2. Anne P. Burnett, "The Virtues of Admetus," *CP* 60 (1965) 240-55.