

# The Classical Review

<http://journals.cambridge.org/CAR>

Additional services for *The Classical Review*:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



---

## The *Alcestis* as a Folk-Drama

E. H. Binney

The Classical Review / Volume 19 / Issue 02 / March 2005, pp 98 - 99

DOI: 10.1017/S0009840X00991571, Published online: 27 October 2009

**Link to this article:** [http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract\\_S0009840X00991571](http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0009840X00991571)

### How to cite this article:

E. H. Binney (1905). The *Alcestis* as a Folk-Drama. The Classical Review, 19, pp 98-99  
doi:10.1017/S0009840X00991571

**Request Permissions :** [Click here](#)

Soph. *O.C.* 1215 f.

ἐπεὶ πολλὰ μὲν αἱ μακραὶ  
ἡμέραι κατέθεντο δῆ.

Cf. Eurip. *I.T.* 843 f.; *Supp.* 277 f.

If the slight change suggested be adopted the verses will read :

Θεῶν δ' ἐπ' ἐσχάrais

120 οὐκέτ' ἔχω 'πὶ τίνα  
μηλοθύταν πορευθῶ.

130 νῦν δὲ τίν' ἔτι βίον  
ἐλπίδα προσδέχωμαι ;

ARTHUR PATCH MCKINLAY.

Cambridge, Mass.

### THE *ALCESTIS* AS A FOLK-DRAMA.

THE position the *Alcestis* occupies with regard to other Greek dramas has caused much discussion as to its nature. I venture to suggest that it may be a relic of a folk-drama on the following grounds. The folk-drama in Greece, in Italy (*Livy* vii. 2), and probably also among the Teutonic races appears to have had a religious, or more probably magic, origin. In our own country one of these folk-dramas has taken the form of the Mummers' play of St. George,<sup>1</sup> and there is strong evidence to show that an essentially similar rite or performance was at one time practised throughout the Teutonic world.<sup>2</sup> The typical Mummers' play as it still survives consists in a meeting between two warriors, who in the prevalent versions are called St. George and the Turkish Knight, and a fight between them after a boastful challenge: one is killed in the encounter and a third party laments his death, and asks in almost the same words in every version

'Is there a doctor to be found  
To cure him of his deadly wound?'

A burlesque character representing a Doctor comes forward, and administers a remedy by which the dead man is restored to life. The archaic character of the performance and its many analogies with other popular rites point to a remote antiquity and class it as one of the widely distributed Death and Revival ceremonies. Now the myth of *Alcestis* represents just such a death and revival; and a myth is so often simply the explanation of a rite that has become unintelligible that one is tempted to conceive that something like the germ of our Mummers' play may lie at the bottom of the

*Alcestis*. If so the rite would probably survive, if not in the official religion, still in outlying country districts, much as our mumming play has survived alongside of and unnoticed by the regular drama. The various characters would have been stereotyped, and although there is no need to suppose that Euripides deliberately put a popular mumming play into literary form when he wrote the *Alcestis*, still in dramatising the myth he may have consciously or unconsciously reproduced the various characters in their conventional aspect: this would explain some of the peculiarities of the play, its happy ending, the burlesque Heracles, etc. The opening altercation between Apollo and Death is not unlike the dialogue between St. George and his opponent in its general tone (ll. 29-76). The lament of the Chorus over the approaching death of *Alcestis* is exactly parallel to our Mummers' lament and appeal for a Doctor, quoted above. They regret that there is no one to cure her now Asclepius is gone (ll. 112-118): he alone could raise the dead (l. 127): and similar appeals are made to Paeon, the god of healing, in lines 91, 92 and 220-222. Heracles, entering after the death of *Alcestis*, resembles the Doctor of the Mummers' play in more ways than one. It is he who restores *Alcestis* to life, and like the Mummers' Doctor he is a burlesque character; though when he undertakes to recover *Alcestis* from Death by force, his character suggests rather that of one of the fighting men than that of the Doctor proper (l. 840).

It would of course be absurd to push these resemblances too far. Even if the Mummers' play and the myth of *Alcestis* are derived ultimately from the same rite, many centuries must have intervened between the time when the germs of the two parted and the literary dramatisation of the latter, and many divergences must have

<sup>1</sup> For details see E. K. Chambers *The Mediaeval Stage*, vol. i. p. 205.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Dr. Frazer's *Golden Bough* (second edition), vol. i. p. 215 *seqq.*, vol. ii. p. 60 *seqq.*, also Grimm's *Teut. Mythology* (Stalybrass) vol. ii. pp. 764, 766, and elsewhere.

occurred from the original. In the *Alcestis* it is a woman who dies and is brought to life: in the Mummings' play it is a man (though in a few versions a woman as well as a man is killed and revived). In the *Alcestis* the character of the hypothetical Doctor is confused between those of Apollo, Asclepius, and Heracles; and again the fighting men are represented by Apollo and Death on the one hand and Heracles and Death on the other. But still, in a performance of this sort tradition is only tenacious of general outlines, and these discrepancies are no greater than are to be found in different versions of the existing Mummings' play, which must have had a common origin. Certainly the Thracians had a mumming play (Xenophon, *Anab.* v. 9, 5) very like the modern one, and although the fact of its being described in detail by Xenophon implies that he did not know of contemporary Greek parallels, this is merely negative evidence, especially considering that the very existence of the modern mumming play is unknown to a large number of people to-day.

There is another point to which attention should be drawn, the reference by the Chorus to the Carneian festival in lines 445-452,

πολλά σε μουσopoλοι  
μέλψουσι . . . . .  
. . . . .  
. . . ἀνίκα Καρνείου περὶνίσσεται ὄρα  
μῆνός . . . . κ.τ.λ.

which implies that the story of *Alcestis* was connected with the Carneia; ostensibly, no doubt, because it was a festival in honour of Apollo, and therefore an allusion to his connection with Admetus would be appropriate. Now in spite of the military character of the Carneia, there is little doubt that it was originally a vegetation rite, probably pre-Dorian, to which the name of Apollo was subsequently attached. We know from Athenaeus (Bk. iv. 141 E) that the men who took part in the festival

lived in booths during the nine days for which it lasted, and from the explanation of σταφυλοδρόμοι (Bekker's *Anecdota*, vol. i. p. 305) that a man wearing garlands (στέμματα) ran along, uttering good wishes for the state, while young men called σταφυλοδρόμοι pursued him. If they caught him it was looked upon as a good omen for the state, if not, the reverse. Exact parallels to this performance are to be found in other European folk customs, enough to show that the Carneia must have been in origin a harvest or vintage festival, at which the vegetation spirit, impersonated by a man wearing garlands, and probably at first by an animal, was chased, and if caught went through the mock ceremony, and in the case of the animal, the reality of being killed.<sup>1</sup> We may conclude therefore that the Carneian festival embodied a Death and Resurrection ceremony; for in rites where the spirit of vegetation is killed his revival is also represented or implied. And in that case its association with the story of Admetus and *Alcestis*, which appears from the way in which it is introduced to have been traditional, would be natural enough. Possibly the story appeared in the form of a regular lament for *Alcestis*, similar to the Linus song and other laments in vegetation ritual, which would give an opportunity for those musical contests which appear to have been usual at the Carneia (cf. *Athenaeus*, xiv. 635). The *Alcestis* story need not have arisen directly from the Carneian rite: it may have become attached to it with the name of Apollo; but probably the similarity of the idea, and possibly the existence elsewhere in Greece of a true *Alcestis* vegetation rite, showed its special fitness.

E. H. BINNEY.

<sup>1</sup> The grounds on which this conclusion is based may be found in S. Wide's *Die Lakonische Kulte*, p. 73 *seqq.* Cf. also Dr. Frazer's *Golden Bough* (second edition), vol. ii. pp. 235, 259, 266, etc.

## PLATONICA II.

I HAVE been taken to task by Mr. Adam (*C.R.* xvi. 215 *sq.*) and Professor Immisch (*Lit. Centralbl.* 1903, 65) for saying with Schanz that the Platonic MSS. known as Flor. x and Ang. v were derived from Vind. F. In spite of their objections, this con-

tinued to seem the simplest working hypothesis, and I claimed no more for it. I am now, however, in a position to give material proof that these two MSS. 'not only may, but must' be derived from Vind. F.

The *Minos* is the last dialogue contained