ForeWord Reviews

GENERAL

Alcestis
Katharine Beutner
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Queen Alcestis exists in literature and art as the quintessential good wife, a woman who loved her husband enough to take his place in the underworld. In Katharine Beutner's debut novel, Alcestis's tale is repeated, but this time our cultural assumptions about her story are questioned. Traditionally, Alcestis's tale concentrates on her selfless devotion to her husband, Admetus; but now, we wonder, what if it was not resolute love that caused Alcestis's choice? Alcestis's three days in the underworld have historically been given little attention; what happened in those days? Beutner's novel offers a unique perspective on Alcestis's story, and renews the myth with apposite complexity and feeling.

Currently a Ph.D. student in eighteenth-century British literature at the University of Texas at Austin, Beutner has provided a well-researched account of Mycenaean Greek life. Alcestis's surroundings and rituals are rendered in detail. Her contemporaries-mortals and gods alike-are vibrantly animated. Alcestis lives in a time when Narcissus is a subject of gossip passed in the kitchen, and Beutner seems to have fully stepped into this era herself.

Like the other Greek characters in the novel's cast, the eponymous heroine is transformed from symbol to living soul. Alcestis lives and dies with ambivalences and self-interest. She negotiates a world of the living that requires her silence and obedience. She enters the world of the dead where her expectations are overturned. "Everything was wrong," Alcestis notes of the underworld, "the improper questions and missed cues, the way Hades bent his head to Persephone." The underworld offers an alternative to women's subordination; it's a place where women can ignore men and refuse to be ignored.

In Beutner's interpretation, by accepting the death, Alcestis claims agency. Alcestis steps toward her descent when her husband tells her to sit. She resists the urge to obey her husband, remain among the living, bow her head, and study her hands like a good wife. She chooses the underworld, where she becomes entangled in a torrid relationship with the capricious Persephone.

The novel begins with a prologue that moves from third to first person point-of-view.

Likewise, the novel takes a myth, often told without an “I,” and puts it into the mouth of Alcestis. The story of Alcestis becomes Alcestis’s story. After this erudite reimagining of an ancient tale, the story of Alcestis will be remembered differently. The piquant novel is as alluring as Persephone’s pomegranates; its protagonist as exceptional as Beutner’s vision. (February) Janelle Adsit