

ALCESTIS AND HER CRITICS

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IN THE PAST CENTURY incredibly contradictory interpretations of Euripides' drama, *Alcestis*, have come into being. Alcestis, herself, is either saint¹ or psychopath²; Admetus, a selfish coward³ or altruistic grand gentleman.⁴ The play is, on the one hand, a pastiche of rhetorical pieces,⁵ on the other, a complex of subtle and dark levels of meaning.⁶ At any rate critical comment has generally maintained that the significance of the play and so also its dramatic destination are to be found in the scene (861-961) where Admetus returns from his wife's grave to lament his error in asking Alcestis to die for him. Thus it is the king's recognition of this mistake that provides the basis for the dramatic action.

This view proceeds from the scholarly tendency to attach undue importance to an obvious *anagnorisis* and to tie up the play's loose ends at that point; and secondly, from the mistaken notion that the dramatic action visibly grows out of Admetus' original request to Alcestis; and finally, from the generally strong sympathy for Alcestis or at least her predicament and the consequent dislike of or tactful indifference to Admetus. Hence an insistence that he get his emotional deserts.

Such a view, however, produces the inevitable conclusion that the play is poorly constructed since the scenes involving Heracles do not in any way advance the plot or Admetus to a recognition of his folly. Because the hypothesis to the play calls the ending *komikoteron* (which, as a matter of fact, need mean only "relatively comic in tone" and refers at any rate only to the ending), the whole of Heracles' part — because

¹ The abbreviations by which I shall make subsequent reference to each work shall be indicated in parentheses in the first citation. F. A. Paley, *Euripides*, 1² (London, 1872): (Paley).

² D. F. W. van Lennep, *Euripides, Selected Plays, Pt. 1, the Alcestis* (Leiden, 1949): (van Lennep).

³ A. M. Dale, *Euripides Alcestis* (Oxford, 1954): (Dale).

⁴ U. v. Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Griechische Tragoedien*, 3² (Berlin, 1906): (Wilamowitz); G. M. A. Grube, *The Drama of Euripides* (London, 1941): (Grube); I. M. Linforth, "The Husband of Alcestis," *Queens Quarterly*, 53 (1946), 147-159: (Linforth).

⁵ Paley and Dale.

⁶ Wilamowitz and van Lennep.

he can be associated with comedy — is generally assumed to be a series of disengaged interludes that offer up in an otherwise somber play a humorous tone to forecast the emotion of the eventual happy ending, so-called.

Indirectly, due to a romantic attachment to Alcestis' determination to die, some critics endow her motives and behavior with a love and generosity that the play does not reveal, and this confusion between alleged motivation and verbal performance is laid at the door of rhetoric, on the theory that it does not matter what she says in the play, but what she does in the legend prior to the dramatic moment. Similarly the speeches of Pheres, the father, because they question Alcestis and her action unfavorably, are considered to be specimens of rhetorical display, not to be believed no matter how compelling their logic.⁷

But it is difficult to believe that the audience preserved such an objective and scholarly attitude toward the events they watched and the speeches they heard. It is most likely that they believed what was said and were emotionally impressed by the drama, and did not seek to go beyond the dramatic limits for explanations of that which occurred. The *Alcestis* is difficult for a twentieth century Westerner to ex-

⁷Dale has an interesting discussion ("Characters and the Action," xxii-xxix) of characterization in tragedy. She points out the error of attempting to piece together the fabric of an elaborate personality from the scant bits of character delineation, a fault from which van Lennep's commentary suffers greatly. She then proceeds to emphasize the great importance of rhetoric in Greek tragedy with the suggestion that what the characters say is fit to the action of the drama, rather than to the author's conception of their personality. "The aim of rhetoric is Persuasion, Πειθώ, and the poet is as it were a kind of λογογράφος who promises to do his best for each of his clients in turn as the situations change and succeed one another" (p. xxviii). (For a thorough discussion of this view see W. Zürcher, *Die Darstellung d. Menschen im Drama d. Euripides* [Basil, 1947], esp. 1-42.) With this Dale removes consistency of characterization and introduces grave problems. Empathy and identification are basic to audience response; yet if they cannot connect the character with his speech, they can never identify through the characters with the thoughts and attitudes which make up so much of Greek tragedy. Again the plot structure disintegrates if the audience is asked to observe a series of rhetorical *tours de force*; it is the various characters reacting one to another which move the plot forward.

amine, for it deals in so intimate a fashion with death, a subject with which we have an emotional and unresigned relationship. Secondly, it studies a woman who agrees to die for her husband at his request; nothing in our experience prepares us for this behavior so that we are in danger of concentrating too much upon this agreement, a circumstance which occurs before the dramatic time and is not of very much concern in the play. The Athenians had the benefit of a familiarity with this legend, and if it has *märchen* origin,⁸ it can be said to be part of their folk consciousness. This familiarity removed the necessity for wondering at the act, as we immediately must do. It seems then that if we are to try to appreciate the play as the dramatist meant us to, we must become at the outset reconciled to the fact that Alcestis chose to die, in the place of Admetus, at his request.

There seems to be no reason to believe that Euripides chose to dramatize the legend as a vehicle for an idea. Clearly enough none is apparent, and equally clear is Euripides' natural curiosity in examining the way in which two people bear up under a given situation. The myth is accepted as a reality and the circumstances force decisions and reactions upon the characters. What Alcestis has chosen to do is an overwhelming sacrifice, overwhelming to the mind in almost any period of Western thought. Yet neither Admetus nor Alcestis ever discuss what motivated her to die, or him to live. We are simply met at the beginning of the play with the fact that Admetus, wanting to live, has asked various people to die for him, and Alcestis has agreed to do so. All of this could have produced in itself an extremely complex drama, but Euripides clearly wants us to ignore this background. We are in the face of a simple fact, and our attention is drawn to the response Admetus and Alcestis make to this simple fact.

The plot is first given direction in the request of the dying Alcestis that Admetus not remarry, and in his consequent avowal to remain in perpetual mourning (280ff.). This request is made all the more effective by the heavy emotional

⁸ A. Lesky, "Alkestis, der Mythos und das Drama," *Wien. S. B. phil.-hist. Kl.*, 203 (1925), 2. Abh.

and logical embroidery with which it is introduced. First, the chorus, in trying to discover whether Alcestis yet lives, outlines the physical crisis of life passing into death, which act is eternally the most exciting for mankind. Then the statement of the servant describing the queen's last private moments is a high point of pathetic narration, which serves to draw the audience's sympathies to the side of the doomed Alcestis, thus giving her dying words the greater importance. Finally, the departing woman is brought forth to die upon the stage, in itself a dramatic rarity in antiquity⁹; and her first words suggest the throes of impending death. During this episode Euripides has quite cleverly presented the queen first in the very act of dying, so that, when she speaks rationally a moment later, we can place her firmly in the context of death. It is in what she now says that the direction of the future action takes shape. The audience must then be strongly enough affected by her words now to remember them in their hearts for the remainder of the action. Surely for all times the dying speak with an authority granted to no one among the living, and here Alcestis quite carefully and exactly sets the terms of her doing. Her speech is a careful, neat study of her right to be obeyed, together with the request that her husband not remarry.

Finally Admetus is allowed to speak. By now the queen has the upper hand, and he speaks from the position of the vanquished. "It will be as you say, never fear," he exclaims (328), and proceeds to document how miserable the future years will be for him. Just how miserable is indicated by his ludicrous notion of placing a statue of her in their bed.¹⁰ His

⁹ See schol. on *Alc.* 233 (vol. 2, 224.20-21, Schwartz).

¹⁰ The statue is one of the great problems of the play to all commentators. Van Lennep, on 348ff., sees it as a psychopathic turn of mind on the part of Admetus. Dale, on 348-54, thinks ". . . Euripides' meaning is that Admetus' grief is *extreme*, not that it was morbid [her italics]." She substitutes a vague adjective for a concrete one. Paley, on 348, after quoting Dindorf (*inventum valde absurdum*) says: ". . . it may be so; but few passages contain a more tender pathos. The Greeks certainly had a much deeper feeling for sculptured forms than we can pretend to realize." Such an action, I should imagine, would seem to a fifth century Greek audience either ludicrous in the extreme, or

vivid description here is important because it reveals more emphatically the direction that the plot will take. He closes upon the subject of his own death, a subject with which he becomes increasingly more involved. The poet is here introducing irony. The more Admetus talks of his own death and begins to yearn for it, the more we are made to realize that Alcestis did not give him life, but living death. In effect his agreement not to remarry is nothing more than perpetual mourning, remarriage being for a family man the only answer to a state of funereal gloom — a fact which Pheres, Heracles, and the chorus often point out. Parenthetically one can only wonder at the concept of Marriage which is evidently held by the majority of the commentators who hold this advice to be, and I quote from one of them, “solace in the lusts of the flesh.”¹¹ At any rate, the chorus indicate that they will see that Admetus adheres to his declarations, and the audience thus expects to see the manner in which Admetus intends to mourn. This is the direction of the plot.

The arrival of Heracles (476) introduces an entirely new element into the story. Heracles is a guest for whom Admetus is at pains to observe the ritual of hospitality. At the same time he is involved in the ritual of mourning which Alcestis sought of him and which society in the person of the chorus expects. The crisis is reached in Admetus' remark (541) *τεθνῶσιν οἱ θανόντες* with the implication that they cannot concern the living.

This mood continues in his speech to the servants to whom he says: “It is not fitting for those enjoying themselves to hear lamenting, nor should guests be made upset” (549-550). Here only dramatic minutes after the queen's death Admetus, in the interests of observing what is hospitably *πρέπον* has absolutely disregarded Alcestis. This violent overthrow of the direction of the plot comes as a shock, which the chorus is quick to make clear. To their objections Admetus throws up his public reputation as a host. He cannot endanger this

disgusting, which would emphasize all the more how great an obligation of mourning Admetus assumes.

¹¹ Van Lennep's note on 1087.

by rejecting Heracles at the door; he cannot even tell Heracles of his misfortune for fear the hero will go to someone else's house. He is so interested in preserving this reputation that he willingly destroys the possible intimate and honest communication he might have had with his friend, Heracles; and the hero later very strongly objects to having been treated so crudely — at line 1017 he says: *καὶ μέμφομαι μὲν μέμφομαι*.¹²

This crucial conflict Admetus hopes to compromise, trying to entertain his guest and mourn his wife at once. He intends to keep these activities separate and the audience is in suspense, waiting for them to collide. Naturally they do with disastrous results. As a consequence of the king's hospitality Heracles has grown merry, and has begun to act in a fashion that is jarring to the situation, causing the unmerited anger of the servant. This particular scene (747-802) is often called pure comedy and so held to be out of place in such a play, and offending.¹³ In reality it is obviously intended to be

¹² See also 1147-48. Dale (p. xxiii) has a lengthy statement on the interpretation of these words, where she attempts to understand them as a form of the mildest reproof. Such a meaning for *μέμφομαι* is not known to me. Again see her note on 1017, where she finds repetition not especially emphatic, but rather conversational. However in the delivery of the spoken word, where much is lost, repetition is very important, and indeed emphatic. Cf. van Lennep pp. 32-33 and on 1017. There appears to be a conflict between Heracles' statement in 857-58 and 1017—at first he praises then he blames Admetus for his act. Dale finds 857 the true statement of Heracles ("If Heracles declares privately at 857 his admiration for the noble and generous impulse . . ." xxiii). So also Grube, (p. 144). Van Lennep (p. 32) sees 857-58 as a "technical necessity . . . critical comment at this juncture . . . would be entirely out of place." Paley tends to soften as does Dale line 1017 by an amazing paraphrase of 1018 (note on 1017). Van Lennep is wrong to assume that there was no other way to solve this technical dilemma; the dramatist composes his scenes as he wishes from many alternatives. Heracles at 855-59 states objectively that Admetus has entertained him in time of trouble, being *γενναῖος*, being *φιλόξενος*. This does not necessarily imply "admiration," nor that Heracles understands Admetus' act as "a noble and generous impulse." Heracles never gives a value judgement here; he only describes. *μέμφομαι* is far more indicative. (To be sure, to be *φιλόξενος* was to the Greeks a virtue, but cf. 809 where the servant calls Admetus *ἄγαν φιλόξενος*.) His desire to return the queen could very easily spring from his friendship with Admetus, and not out of admiration for his hospitality. Cf. Linforth, p. 155.

¹³ Dale, xxi: ". . . Herakles gormandizing off stage is a stock piece of comedy and so is the assertion of hedonistic materialism in his address to

an offending scene — offensive to the servant, and to Heracles when he discovers the real situation. The discordant behavior of Heracles is the culmination of Admetus' inability to deal with human beings. He has insulted his house — we feel this in the servant's speech (who at 809 says: ἄγαν ἐκείνός ἐστ' ἄγαν φιλόξενος) — and he has put Heracles in an embarrassing position.

Concerned with the ritual of being host, the king does not care about mourning for Alcestis, albeit he goes to bury her with the necessary funeral rites; for, as the servant points out, Admetus denies those in the house who must serve the guest the natural expression of their grief, and he himself, in his moments of hospitality, can put aside casually his own feeling. And Admetus certainly does not care about Heracles' feelings. He sees him only as a guest, not as a sympathetic friend. In so doing he truly insults him, which perhaps engenders the latent resentment of Heracles which seems evident at the close of the drama in the cat-and-mouse game that is played with Admetus' feelings.¹⁴ The present scene then reveals what Admetus' conflict between host and mourner means in human terms. In the final scene (1008ff.) between Admetus and Heracles, the king can no longer put off the consequences of this irreconcilable conflict; it is Heracles who forces this upon him by requesting, as Admetus' guest, that

the servant." But as she well points out, on 754-55, "So each motif of the traditional burlesque can be modified to suit this context." Cf. van Lennep, on 779, who finds this scene not funny. For Grube (p. 131) the scene is "pure comedy," to which he adds (p. 141): ". . . the introduction of the comic at this point may well have shocked the Athenian sense of propriety." To shock and offend is exactly what Euripides is trying to achieve here, and immediately the context removes the comic nature of the scene. This is similar to the first scene of Tennessee Williams' *Glass Menagerie*, in which the viciously sarcastic remarks of the narrator are drained of their humor by the miserable situation into which they are cast.

¹⁴ Van Lennep, on 1075, sees this "elaborate teasing" as a delight for the audience. Grube (p. 144) can say: ". . . when he is disturbed by this woman's likeness to his wife, we have pure comedy, for he is afraid of falling in love with the stranger." Only in the most formal sense could this scene possibly be considered to partake of the comic, for in its context this teasing is a dreadful trial for Admetus.

the king keep a young maiden for him while he goes about his labors. The young girl is in all ways a threat to the mourning husband. First she is a personal threat, I think, to his determination of celibacy; for note his attention to her physical person, and his concern for the effect she will have upon the young men of the house in lines 1050, 1061-63, and 1051-54. She is a threat also to his public repute as a mourning husband (1057-1059), and, what is strange, he fears reproach from his dead wife, for whom, he says, it is necessary to have respect.

The stichomythy between the two finds Heracles suggesting all the usual forms of consolation, all of which Admetus rejects, resolutely purposing to mourn forever, here echoing his much earlier resolve which he had voiced to the dying Alcestis. Here again we are back in the original direction of the plot. This is the mourning husband, and as such, the king cannot accept the girl into the house, an act which is in itself completely neutral. But yet he does accept the girl, in the face of Heracles' projected displeasure, for he cannot risk, ironically enough, the offended guest. So in the presence of the live guest, the living need of being host conquers the mourner's role. Euripides makes Admetus' surrender complete by Heracles' insistence that Admetus take the young girl by the hand, and by Admetus' compliance, albeit grudging, with this demand. Thus, the original direction of the plot passes through suspenseful moments, and is finally overthrown, and it is a matter of interest that the obligation to mourn which was taken on in a prolonged and strongly emotional setting is renounced for the obligation of being host which was virtually assumed without dramatic cause.

This reversal is carefully prepared by Euripides so that there will be no undue strain on the credulity of the audience. Most specifically in Admetus' encounter with his father, Pheres, (614ff.) and in his lament following the funeral (935ff.), is the mourning obligation loosened. The appearance of Pheres is marked with interest because all persons in the play have continually rebuked him for not wanting to die, not, as the critics so frequently assume, on moral grounds,

but entirely for the practical reason that being well past the age for begetting children, he has nothing to live for. The father's opening speech is brisk and content; Pheres is a practical man: he speaks to his son of the necessity of enduring discomfort; he speaks of the benefits he has received from Alcestis' death, that is, that he will not have a childless old age. He says that she has given all women something of which to be proud. He concludes his first speech by asserting that if marriages were not profitable, there would be no point in marrying. Pheres pointedly alludes to the practical gains which Alcestis' death has brought him, and it compels us to look for Alcestis' altruistic motive in what she did, and to ask what benefits she expected to confer, a subject to which she never turned. Again we realize the fact that Admetus, who must have had some compelling reasons to go on living, never mentions them. And so, confronted with Pheres' natural and enthusiastic appraisal of Alcestis' death, we are aware of the fact that her death and Admetus' continuance of life have produced nothing of worth for the two most vitally affected. It was an empty gesture in terms of altruistic purpose. In Admetus' answer we find that his father's realistic discussion has forced a measure of rationality on the son, who proceeds to attempt feebly to sum up reasons first why his parents would not die for him, and second why they ought to have done so. His remarks are foolish and magnified as such in the dignified reply of the old man. In this speech Pheres stresses that he is a free man, and that he has fulfilled all the duties of a parent. But as a man he has as much right to life as any other. "You were born to be lucky or unlucky in terms of yourself, alone," he says (685-686); that is, your fate is your own. He states nicely the consequences of being a free man when he says: "Don't you die for me, any more than I would die for you" (690). Pheres here demonstrates that a man has only a part of himself in a function, in a role (which in this case is that of a parent), and that, as a free man, he, the person, is something greater. The cool and composed tone of his speech in part dispels the heavy emotion that has been earlier accumulating. The actions of Alcestis and Admetus, stripped

of their superficial emotion, lie bare, needing new interpretations, new evaluations, and Pheres verbalizes the underlying significance of what has gone before. His son he calls a coward (697-702), and Alcestis he calls witless, ἄφρων (728). Euripides, by softening with these words the importance of Alcestis' death, has provided the balance necessary for the final conflict between the host and mourner which is soon to confront Admetus.

Pheres' set speeches, strong in argument and forcefully declared, are two to his son's one; in every sense the old man has the final word; and it seems as though the prevailing truth were Pheres', that the death of his daughter-in-law were on shallow foundation, of little consequence. The critics, however, while accepting Pheres' criticisms of Admetus, reject the validity of his arguments in their entirety on two unlikely bases: first, because he is a despicable character and second, because what he says, although convincing and forceful, is a rhetorical piece.¹⁵ Beneath these lurks the rigorous denial of any adverse criticism of Alcestis or her death which would

¹⁵ For a compelling view of the pivotal importance of the Pheres scene see Linforth, who can say, (p. 159): "Pheres alone tells the truth." Nevertheless the import of his words is easily denied. Dale, on 697, can say: "There is no doubt that he [Pheres] wins on points with this superb speech . . . not that Euripides approves of the old rascal . . . but the plot requires that Admetus should be defeated here, so that when his temper has cooled he shall realize what the ill-disposed can make of this situation." The inorganic nature of this scene had been assumed already by Paley (p. 251): "The dispute between Admetus and Pheres is calculated, as Hermann observes, and as was very probably designed, to please a contentious and law-loving audience." So van Lennep on 694ff. All feel contempt for Pheres, best expressed by van Lennep on 685: "A fascinating maxim revealing Pheres' almost sublime egotism and perhaps something, too, of the fundamental bitterness of Euripides' outlook on life." Such an opinion stems from Judaeo-Christian thinking; we are not *a priori* our brother's keepers. Grube (pp. 129-130) suggests a practical reason why Pheres was in the wrong, because he should have wanted to preserve the dynastic royal line. But Euripides does not introduce that into the play; also, would that have been a compelling or understandable reason to a democratic, fifth century Athenian audience without a good deal of substantiation? For the belief that Pheres is realistically human cf. G. Cammelli, *Alceste* (Firenze, 1946), xiv.

upset the common conception of the play and her position therein. Pheres is despicable to them because he refuses to die for another man, although to me there is no warrant in the play, or in Greek thinking, for the belief that such a position is morally untenable. In a situation peopled essentially with shabby characters, Pheres hardly seems conspicuously evil. The charge of rhetorical coloring of his speeches carries with it the tacit assumption that what is rhetorically developed is not to be believed. It is an unlikely audience that would hear and absorb the compelling arguments of Pheres, and in the face of the faltering rejoinders by the son, reject the old man's reasoning because it was possessed of rhetorical flourishes. Rather it is reasonable to assume that Pheres causes the queen's death to appear meaningless, and therefore weakens the force of Admetus' obligation to her.

On a more emotional level this idea is developed during Admetus' lament following the funeral, where he is found delivering speeches that are savagely ironic. Savage, because he now longs for death which in prior time he so studiously avoided, and yet, since we do not know why he wanted to stay alive, we have nothing with which to balance his new desire to die. Here we have the *anagnorisis*, but an interesting one it is. For Admetus pictures life ahead as the barren, joyless one it will be, and realizes that it will not be a life worth living. But, as to facing the cowardly act of allowing his wife to die for him, which his father has forced him to think about, he cannot say with true responsibility, "this I did, for this I am accountable." Indeed, he says instead: "He who is my enemy shall say 'There is the coward who gave his wife to Hades instead of himself'" (954-957). This brings forth two observations: first, it is the public recognition of his cowardice which moves him, who is ever conscious of his outward public appearance, and second, he limits such an estimation of cowardice to his enemies alone. Thus he has far removed himself from seeing his own responsibility in the situation, refusing to examine whatever is human in him. His very deep regard for his public role come through in the last three lines of his speech (959-961): "Now in addition to all my other

troubles, I shall have this ill fame; so really, friends, what's the good of living with misery and a bad reputation?"

But it is in the queen's person and in her statements early in the play that this reversal is subtly prepared. It is also in understanding her scene correctly that one is able to comprehend the creation of Admetus as the principal sympathetic figure in this drama. The dramatist limits the dramatic action to the day of her death, thus ignoring Admetus' original dilemma and his wife's decision to die for him. By so doing he strengthens definitely the position of Admetus, for we are thus not in position to see the possibly ignoble request of the king, nor be moved to admiration for the actions of his sacrificing wife. All of this is prior to the dramatic moment, and if the drama is compelling, the audience will not have the time to speculate on prior events.¹⁶

When first the serving girl portrays Alcestis to us (152ff.), what do we learn that the queen is doing in those last few moments alone? She prays to the goddess of the hearth for the welfare of her children, and she addresses her bed in a tender and moving farewell. Interestingly enough she at no time mentions Admetus as an object of her concern. The man for whom she is supposedly taking this action fails to come into her consciousness. Again it is interesting that at no time later does she express her feelings as much to her husband as she does here to her bed. (Incidentally to the bed she says that she did not want to betray it, and that she does not hate it. Of course, in so saying, the possibility of doing so is thus implanted in the audience's mind.)

What Alcestis did as the servant narrated it, and what she says finally to Admetus on stage have occasioned a great deal of comment. And that is because in these two instances alone

¹⁶ The time element between Admetus' knowledge of his imminent death, Alcestis' agreement to die for him, and the time setting of the play cause the commentators concern, e.g., Dale, pp. xvi-xvii; van Lennep, pp. 7-9, also his notes on 9, 13, 147, 158 and *passim*. Wilamowitz (pp. 86-87) develops out of this his theory that Alcestis' evident resentment toward Admetus represents the resentment of the Mother paying for the Bride's oath. The fact of the matter is that Euripides does not mention the time element, so that it would never come to the mind of the audience.

her character is exhibited to us. What she says can be noted in detail, why she says it can be conjectured, and in conclusion one can observe certain simple facts that would come across to the audience. Her request to Admetus is obvious and no one would miss that; it is indeed the point of her speaking. But to look further, we cannot escape the fact that her expressions of concern are limited always solely to her children, and since they are of no importance in the play we can and do ignore them. For Admetus, on the other hand, she has no endearing words, no expression of future happiness, only mistrust, and coldness; and this is important.

In this speech (280ff.) Alcestis begins by strengthening her right to demand, in observing the expanse of her sacrifice. Incidentally she indicates here briefly a possible motivation for her action; namely the difficulty of rearing fatherless children, and the fact that she has nothing left of youthful enthusiasm (287-89). This is altogether rather world-weary and strikingly devoid of any feeling for Admetus.

She also indicates her narrow concept of the scope of human activity when she insists that Admetus' parents had every reason to die for him since they had already borne a son, and were beyond the age of child-bearing, all of which implies that their existence had no other meaning. This attitude is answered by the old father himself later on.

Having established her claim to be obeyed, she proceeds to lay down the charge, namely that Admetus is not to remarry. Here again we see that she fails to put this into the perspective of herself and Admetus, or Admetus alone, but limits it to the welfare of the children. They must be masters, she says, in *my* house (304). The children then will be the living symbol of the promissory note. Having just asked Admetus not to remarry, she addresses her daughter as though he undoubtedly would, picturing to herself the misery that would ensue for her child. When the queen paints the ugly future which Admetus is bound to produce, the loyalty and faith between the couple become at best very dubious. She describes in compelling phrases the misery that he will cause; and this veiled reproach, coupled with the absence of any en-

dearment, emphasizes the sterility of their relationship. Throughout this portion of the play there is a verbal theme played out in *προδίδωμι*,¹⁷ which bears the double meaning of *to desert* and *to betray*, which highlights the exceptional demands that the king and queen are placing upon each other.

Alcestis finishes her request with an insurmountable statement: "It is for you, the husband, to boast that you had the best wife, and for you, O children, that you were born of the best of mothers" (323-325). She is in every way the best and can have no successor.

One may wonder why Admetus wanted to stay alive and how he got up the nerve to ask Alcestis to die for him. But these are puzzlements which Euripides does not wish us to consider and he has purposely left them outside the drama. We are made to see, however, the lifeless and selfish grounds upon which Alcestis chose to die, and her obvious disregard for Admetus, as well as his for her. Indeed Admetus' pathetic farewells to his wife relate only to what she is doing to *him* by departing. She has just doomed him to an empty existence. It may be asked whether or not life is not worth living simply to be able to enjoy sight, color, and sound. But for a man in middle years probably the family habit constitutes living. In the case of death the old truism, as we have earlier pointed out, is most valid: time and a new wife heals all. Admetus has been forced to disown any replacement to stabilize human relationship, and he has been forced to see reared up forever and ever in his house the eternal memory of the best of women.

The character of Alcestis is given little delineation and she is hard to understand. In terms of the plot structure she provides the motivation for her husband's conflicting sentiments in his treatment of Heracles. As a dying woman she attempts to create a posthumous future by attending to her children's welfare, and by denying her husband any substitute for herself. It is notable that she never speaks to Admetus in affectionate terms, and that her determination to die was not

¹⁷ Lines 180, 202, 250, 275, 290.

the most conflict in regard to her person is that narrated by for his benefit. The episode which produces for the critics the slave. Here she prays for her children, and says farewell tearfully to her bed, and makes no mention of Admetus. One is led to wonder whether the farewell to the bed, her only moment of tenderness, is to be understood as a symbol of a tender, loving farewell to her husband. Since she manages in speech to separate the two quite distinctly, and since her subsequent speeches to him are indifferent,¹⁸ if not slightly hostile, the answer, it seems, must be *no*. Then what, we may ask, does she mean by bidding the bed farewell in so intimate and emotional a fashion?

The queen was the bed partner of the king and the bearer of his children. In fulfilling these roles she found her expression, and these are primarily connected with the royal bed. There is no suggestion of a relationship of personalities between Admetus and Alcestis, such as between Jason and Medea. Their contact was limited to duty or function; her role was in the bedchamber. Then again Alcestis' criticism of her husband's parents springs from the same mentality. Their roles as parents were fulfilled; they might as well, or better, have died. That they as individual human beings might have enjoyed life never occurs to her.

Perhaps she as a person is resentful of her limited position, and in her deathbed request she is able to force herself upon Admetus in a way that she has never been able to do before. This psychological position is common in Euripides, so many of whose plays do take up the mystery of rejection, and the resentment born of it, especially in the souls of women.

In regard to what has been said the objection can well be raised that this sort of analysis requires a great deal of subtle interpretation on the part of the audience, and so it does. Primarily such things come to the attention of the student of the printed page. But the audience would notice

¹⁸ Her language makes clear that she sees the bed and her husband as two separate entities; 178-181, ὦ λέκτρον . . . τοῦδ' ἄνδρος . . . προυδοῦναι γὰρ σ' ἄκροῦσα καὶ πόσιν . . .

that the dying Alcestis was in no way concerned with the effect that her death will have upon her husband, other than it will be a strong deterrent to his remarriage. His future welfare does not interest her. All in all there is a strong suggestion of a cold relationship throughout the early portion of the play; this much any audience could sense.

Many critics have noticed and remarked upon this estrangement between the royal couple, suggesting innumerable reasons for it, some of them rather fancy; or they have sometimes denied it, as Gilbert Murray does,¹⁹ in his translation of the play, by inserting into her speeches fabricated terms of endearment. Usually it is suggested either that the playwright is hiding her true feelings beneath the rhetorical mask, or that any allusion to concern or affection for one's husband in public was not *πρέπον* for tragic ladies. The critics operate on the assumption that although she may not demonstrate a lover for her husband at this point, the fact that she agreed to die for him proves this love.²⁰ Here again they go outside the drama to establish an unverballed meaning for an important portion of the play, something the audience has not the time to do.

Why Alcestis speaks as she does is dramatically beside the point, because in the play she does not figure dramatically except to make a request and to die. But it is important to realize that the dramatists has removed from consideration the queen's possible love for her husband. There are two excellent reasons for this; first, to allow Admetus to gain some of the audience's sympathy from the start, which otherwise might have gone totally to the queen, and secondly, so that her request and his vow will be made against the forceful and emotional backdrop of her death, a strong yet not invincible lever on his actions. If instead, the queen had made her demand amid protestations of love and consideration for her husband, clearly revealing her sacrifice, in the warmest possible sympathetic tones, Admetus would not have been accept-

¹⁹ Noticed by Grube, p. 14

²⁰ Dale (p. xxvi) goes outside the spoken lines into her own logic to say: "Of course, she loves Admetus—what else made her die for him?"

able to the audience, and his future actions would have been emotional bond of altruism cementing her request and his weighed in his and the audience's mind with the personal vow. On the contrary, it is the force of this death, not the force of love which directs him, and the death can be made to lose its validity. As it is, he is made to seem an isolated figure beset with a conflict not of his own making, the demands of the dying, the demands of the guest.

As a conclusion to the play, Heracles reveals that the veiled figure is Alcestis and the outlines of the myth are brought full close. Euripides has chosen to present Alcestis as speechless, which is generally considered to be the only possible tasteful procedure. Yet Euripides has stressed by this speechlessness the absence of communication and feeling between the two which was marked before. Instead of creating a scene of joyous, intimate and personal exclamations between the united couple, he has exhibited only silence.

The verdict is that neither Admetus nor Alcestis are very attractive people. Why that is so probably stems from the fact that no deeply feeling, moral people could establish such a contract between themselves. Admetus was selfish to ask Alcestis to die for him; she was selfish to use her death on him in the way that she did. Certainly Admetus emerges as the protagonist, first, as has been pointed out,²¹ because he takes the far greater number of lines. In addition Euripides has so arranged the materials of the myth as to give to the king the center field of action. Admetus seems to be presented with forces and conflicts which have their motivations outside the drama; that is to say, because there is excluded from the drama until the Pheres scene all but the most perfunctory references to Admetus' original dilemma and request, we first come to know the king beset with the powerful obligation on the one hand to mourn the dying wife, and on the other to entertain the visiting guest. The drama is his resolution of the conflict that they bring him.

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²¹ Linforth, p. 148