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## EURIPIDES' *ALKESTIS*: FIVE ASPECTS OF AN INTERPRETATION

This article is intended to be a contribution towards an overall understanding of *Alkestis*. I discuss five topics which seem to me to be of major importance for our interpretation of the play. Whereas many previous treatments have concentrated on matters of characterization, especially relating to Admetos, the emphasis of my own account will be different. Only the fourth of my sections will engage with the debate over character. For the rest, I shall be analysing the changing significance of the door in the visual stage action (section 1), the boundary between life and death (section 2), the role of Herakles (section 3), and the tone of the work as a whole (section 5).

### 1. The door of the house

The *skene* represents Admetos' palace at Pherai. In the centre is the door, the visual focus for most of the significant actions in the plot.

According to a stage direction in some manuscripts, the play begins with the emergence of Apollo from the house. While it is impossible to demonstrate the correctness of such a direction, it is surely incontrovertible that such a beginning is symbolically appropriate. Apollo's identification with the fortunes of Admetos is now over: the presence of the god from above is to be replaced by that of the god from below. Thus at the end of the first scene, Apollo leaves by the side exit, but Thanatos enters the palace through the central doorway<sup>1</sup>.

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1. Apollo emerges from house: see N.C. Hourmouziades, *Production and Imagination in Euripides*, Athens 1965, 162-3. Symbolism of Apollo leaving and Thanatos entering the house: J. Dingel, *Das Requisit in der griechischen Tragödie*, Diss. Tübingen 1967, 213, followed by A. Rivier, 'En marge d'Alceste et de quelques interprétations récentes', *Mus. Helv.* 29 (1972) 124-40, at 130. (There is virtually nothing on *Alk.* in E.H. Haight, *The Symbolism of the House Door in Classical Poetry*, New York 1950).



When the chorus arrive they notice (98ff) that outside the door there is no sign either of hair cut in mourning or of a vessel of water - needed, after a death, so that those emerging can purify themselves before resuming contact with normality outside<sup>1</sup>. The reason for these absences is of course that Alkestis is still alive. When she has emerged, spoken and died, she is carried back into the house; and the house-door then takes on the significance which had been prefigured as Thanatos passed through it: it becomes the point of transition between the polluted interior and the non-polluted world outside.

With the arrival of Herakles on his way north, the door's significance is intensified. In order to treat Herakles properly, i.e. as a ξένος and φίλος should treat his ξένος and φίλος, Admetos must persuade him to enter the house - in spite of the evidence from Admetos' appearance that this is a place of mourning. (Incidentally, it is surely quite likely that a vessel of water has now been placed on stage outside the door.) The pivot of Admetos' persuasion of Herakles is linguistic: the woman who has died was ὀθνεῖος, 'no blood relation' (532-3)<sup>2</sup>. For the first of two occasions in the play, a man gets his φίλος to enter the house by deception, but for the best of motives.

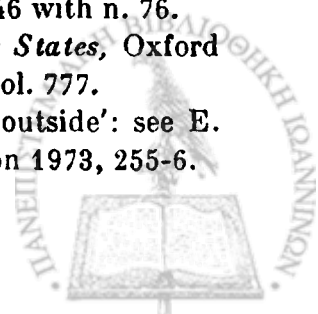
After the carrying-out of Alkestis and the argument with Pheres, the next scene, between Herakles and the servant, goes back to the linguistic point which I have just mentioned, but with a different word in question. 'Why so gloomy?', asks Herakles; 'the πῆμα is θυραῖον' (778); 'the woman who died was θυραῖος' (805). 'She was only too θυραῖος', replies the servant (811). Herakles: 'These don't sound like θυραῖα πῆματα' (814); and later, when he knows the true identity of the deceased: 'He persuaded me by saying it was a θυραῖον κῆδος he was taking to the tomb' (828). Θυραῖος - etymologically, 'at, connected with, the door' (hence Hermes, that quintessential boundary-crosser, can be Hermes Thuraios)<sup>3</sup>. But just as 'Go and see who's at the door' means 'Go and see who's outside the door', so θυραῖος can mean 'one connected with the outside', 'an outsider'<sup>4</sup>. And a wife is an 'outsider', brought across the threshold into the husband's house from outside.

1. Schol. *Alk.* 98, 99; Aristoph. *Ekk.* 1033; Pollux 8.65-6; cf. D. C. Kurtz and J. Boardman, *Greek Burial Customs*, London 1971, 146, and R. Parker, *Miasma*, Oxford 1983, 35.

2. See W. Steidle, *Studien zum antiken Drama*, Munich 1968, 146 with n. 76.

3. Hermes Thuraios: cf. L.R. Farnell, *The Cults of the Greek States*, Oxford 1896-1909, vol. 5, 66 n. 23, and Eitrem in Pauly-Wissowa *RE* VIII, col. 777.

4. Linguistic connections between words meaning 'door' and 'outside': see E. Benveniste, *Indo-European Language and Society*, Eng. trans. London 1973, 255-6.



It is exactly this reference which becomes poignantly explicit in the next scene. Admetos, having just buried Alkestis, returns to confront the house-door, now hateful to him because of yet another range of associations which the door has.

ἰώ, στυγναὶ  
 πρόσοδοι, στυγναὶ δ' ὄψεις χήρων  
 μελάθρων... (861ff)  
 ὃ σχῆμα δόμων, πῶς εἰσέλθω; (911)

He is reminded of that other time when he passed through the house-door, when he and Alkestis, white-robed instead of black, surrounded not by lamentation but by marriage songs, together entered the house, with Admetos holding her hand - that is, her wrist - in his (917)<sup>1</sup>.

As the door was a boundary-marker in the case of a death, so it was in the case of a wedding. A Greek wedding dramatised in ritual terms the transition of a woman from the οἶκος of her father to the οἶκος, or more specifically the bedroom, of her husband. The crossing of the threshold of the new οἶκος was one aspect of this transition. There was, as far as I know, nothing comparable to the Roman custom<sup>2</sup> of carrying the bride over the threshold (so marking the danger and significance of the passage); and the door of the θάλαμος or bridal chamber seems if anything to have been of more importance (it was outside t h a t door that a θυρωρός was posted)<sup>3</sup>: nevertheless, the crossing of the threshold of the house itself was marked in Greece, since it was there that the couple were welcomed by the groom's parents<sup>4</sup>.

Recalling his marriage, Admetos describes his present dilemma:

πῶς γὰρ δόμων τῶνδ' εἰσόδους ἀνέξομαι; (941)  
 ἢ μὲν γὰρ ἔνδον ἐξελᾶ μ' ἐρημία (944)

1. Groom holds bride χειρ' ἐπὶ καρπῶ: see Ian Jenkins, 'Is there life after marriage?', *BICS* 30 (1983) 137-45; the significance of the gesture in *Alk.* is noted by H.P. Foley, *Ritual Irony*, Ithaca 1985, 87-8.

2. Bride carried over threshold in Rome: refs. listed by M. B. Ogle, 'The house-door in Greek and Roman religion and folklore', *AJPh* 32 (1911) 251-71, at 253.

3. *θυρωρός*: Sappho 110 L. - P.; Pollux 3.42; Hesych. *s.v.*; see also Theoc. 15.77 with Gow *ad loc.* We may add that the literary lover/suitor only got as far as the house door, which was where he sang his *paraklausithuron*; cf. F. O. Copley, *Exclusus Amator*, *APhA* monograph 17, 1956.

4. Welcome by groom's parents: schol. Eur. *Phoin.* 344 (mother); Sabouroff Ioutrophoros, illustration and refs. in Jenkins (n.1 above) = Daremberg/Saglio *s.v.* 'matrimonium', fig. 4866 (mother and father); Berlin cup, Beazley *ARV<sup>2</sup>* 831,20 (mother); Louvre pyxis, Beazley *ARV<sup>2</sup>* 924, 33 = E. Pfuhl, *Malerei und Zeichnung der Griechen*, Munich 1923, pl. 580 with pp. 568-9 (?mother and father).



ἔξωθεν δέ (950): 'But outside' there will be weddings, social gatherings of women of Alkestis' age - and that too will be intolerable. Apollo's unique gift to him has resulted in a unique dilemma.

But when all is said and done, *Alkestis* is not a tragedy, it is a non-satyrical fourth play. And so we have the scene where Herakles returns with a veiled woman (see section 2). He reproaches Admetos for entertaining him as if concerned only for *Θουραίου πῆματος* (1014 - a line unnecessarily deleted by Méridier following Lachmann) and he urges Admetos to take the woman into the house. When Admetos at last relents, Herakles goes further: Admetos must lead her in with his own right hand - enacting, of course, the entry of a bridal couple (1115). For the second time a *φίλος* is deceiving a *φίλος* in order to be kind - although there is in this case perhaps a fine balance between our sense of the pain of the deceived *φίλος* and our anticipation of his joy. But eventually Admetos looks at Alkestis' face; and what came perilously close to being a bitter parody of part of a wedding ceremony turns into a resolementisation of the union which only death has put asunder. From the beginning of the play the significance of the action of entering the house has varied as the house itself has successively become a place of death, hospitality, mourning, and marriage. At the end, the restored stability of the house is sealed by a definitive re-entry of Admetos and Alkestis over the threshold, as man and wife.

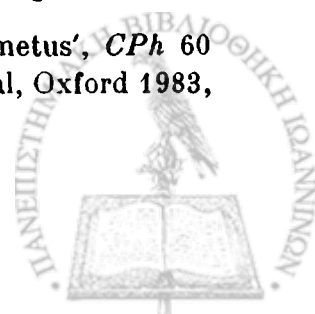
## 2. Life and death

The relations between life and death in *Alkestis* are complex<sup>1</sup>; and perhaps the most interesting aspect of this complexity is the fact that, for virtually the whole of the play, Alkestis herself is presented as being between life and death. Before going inside the house, Thanatos says that the person whose hair his sword has 'consecrated' (*ἀγνίστη*, 76) by cutting it is thenceforth *ἱερός* to the gods below: so begins Alkestis' separation from life. In practically their first words the chorus express doubt about whether Alkestis is alive or dead (80ff). When a servant-girl comes out of the house, and the chorus ask her, 'Is she alive or dead?', they are told:

*καὶ ζῶσαν εἰπεῖν καὶ θανοῦσαν ἔστι σοι* (141)

By her actions - washing herself as a preliminary to putting on the clothes in which she will die; praying to the Hearth and adorning the altars

1. Good remarks on this in A.P. Burnett, 'The virtues of Admetus', *CPh* 60 (1965) 240-55, repr. in *Oxford Readings in Greek Tragedy*, ed. E. Segal, Oxford 1983, 254-71, esp. 269.



of the other gods; bidding farewell to her bed, children and servants - Alkestis shows that she is in the process of dying. It is not a physiological, 'Hippokratean' process ('seventh day: great chill; acute fever; much sweat; death'); rather it is a social process, involving severance from all the cultural ties which bind a person to life<sup>1</sup>. The counterpart to the social process of dying is the belief that death is not instantaneous, but a journey: so Alkestis sees a two-oared boat, and Charon calls, τί μέλλεις; (252, 255). The reference to Charon is significant: he, like Thanatos<sup>2</sup>, is an intermediate agent of death. Perhaps this makes the ultimate rescue more imaginatively credible: the dead woman has not yet been definitively incarcerated in Hades. Furthermore, although she dies at line 391, Alkestis in a way remains, even after that, between life and death. We have already been told (348ff) of Admetos' plan to give his wife a kind of continued existence by creating a life-like statue of her; and when Herakles arrives and asks, 'How is your wife?', Admetos' reply ἔστιν τε κοῦκέτ' ἔστιν (521) seems to perpetuate in a linguistic manner this ambiguity of Alkestis' status. And even at the very end of the play, when Death has been defeated, Alkestis is still not yet fully alive. As throughout the play, so at its end, she is poised on the boundary between life and death. To see how this can be so, it will be necessary to explore two themes: veiling and silence.

On the evidence of Admetos' words at 1050 ('She is young, to judge from her clothing and appearance') the scholiast inferred that Alkestis was veiled; and he was surely right. At 1121 Herakles instructs Admetos: βλέψον πρὸς αὐτὴν - and here Herakles will have unveiled her. (Compare *Herakles Mainomenos* 1227, where Theseus, unveiling Herakles, tells him: βλέψον πρὸς ἡμᾶς.) The veil in *Alkestis* is powerful from the sheerly dramatic point of view, in that it makes possible the tense persuasion of Admetos by Herakles, which depends on Admetos' inability correctly to identify a woman - just as Admetos earlier persuaded Herakles when Herakles failed correctly to identify a woman.

But there is more to veiling than that. A veil often marks out an individual who is in a marginal or transitional state. Those in mourning veiled themselves<sup>3</sup>. Those in the abnormal state of being polluted might cover their heads<sup>4</sup>. And of course veiling might mark a transition with

1. On death as a process see now Robert Garland, *The Greek Way of Death*, London 1985, 13.

2. See Dale's commentary on 871.

3. Hom. *Iliad* 24.93-4, *Od.* 8.92; Hom. H. *Dem.* 40ff; Plato *Phaidon* 117c; etc.

4. *Her. Main.* 1160-2, with Bond's commentary *ad loc.*



quite different emotional resonances: as *Kassandra* says in *Agamemnon*, 'My oracle will no longer peep out from a veil like a newly-married bride' (1178-9). That the bridal veil signals a transition is evident enough; but there is uncertainty over details. We know that the bride was veiled at the meal at her father's house<sup>1</sup>, but when did she unveil? In his recent account of the *Anakalupteria* or Ceremony of Unveiling, Oakley<sup>2</sup> followed Deubner<sup>3</sup> in placing it at the house of the bride's father, i.e. before the procession to the new house. However, not only is it more plausible on general grounds of ritual symbolism that the bride made the transition from house to house veiled<sup>4</sup>, but there is a considerable number of vases showing the bride in the bridal procession with her head still veiled, even if her face is visible<sup>5</sup>. Whenever the unveiling took place, it is clear that the moment when the groom saw the bride's face was an important one in the wedding ritual (one name for the gifts presented to the bride at the *Anakalupteria* was *ὀπτήριον*, 'to do with seeing')<sup>6</sup>; and realising the importance of the moment of seeing the bride may sharpen our awareness of what is at stake in the unveiling in Euripides' play.

What, then, of the veiled *Alkestis*? She is in a doubly transitional state. Firstly, she is still between death and life, between the other world and this<sup>7</sup>. Secondly, her new arrival at *Admetos' οἶκος* is like the prelude to a second marriage. There is no reason to believe that *Alkestis' unveiling before entering the house* represents a direct transcription of wedding ritual. Rather it would seem that the symbolism of unveiling

1. Luc. *Symp.* 8: *πάνν ἀκριβῶς ἐγκεκαλυμμένη*. An *onos* from Eretria (Beazley *ARV*<sup>2</sup> 1250-1,34, Arias/Hirmer *HGVP* pl.203) shows *Alkestis* veiled in the company of women - possibly before the wedding.

2. John H. Oakley, 'The *Anakalupteria*', *Arch. Anz.* 1982, 113-18.

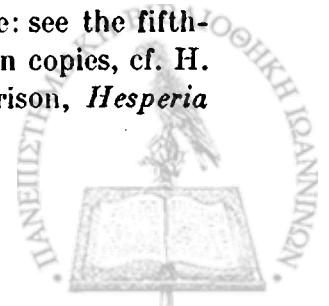
3. L. Deubner, 'ΕΠΙΤΑΙΑ', *JDAI* 15 (1900), 144-54.

4. So rightly P. Roussel, 'La famille athénienne', *Lettres d'Humanité* 9(1950), 5-59, at 10.

5. For vases depicting wedding processions see C.H.E. Haspels, 'Deux fragments d'une coupe d'Euphronios', *BCH* 54(1930), 422-51; J. Boardman, 'Pottery from Eretria', *ABSA* 47(1952), 1-48, at 34-5; I. Krauskopf, 'Eine attisch schwarzfigurige Hydria in Heidelberg', *Arch. Anz.* 1977, 13-37. Examples of 'veiled' bride - i.e. bride with head covered - in bridal procession: Sabouroff *loutrophoros*, Berlin cup and Louvre pyxis as cited in n. 4, p.77 above; hydria from Orvieto (in Florence, Mus. Nat.) showing *Peleus* and *Thetis* on marriage chariot, Beazley *ABV* 260, 30; pelike in Louvre showing veiled bride being led *χεῖρ' ἐπὶ καρπῶ*, Beazley *ARV*<sup>2</sup> 250, 15.

6. *Pollux* 2.59; 3.36; cf. Deubner (cit. in n. 3 above), 148.

7. *Eurydike* too is veiled during her transition from death to life: see the fifth-century relief of *Orpheus*, *Eurydike* and *Hermes* (known from Roman copies, cf. H. A. Thompson, *Hesperia* 21 (1952), 60ff, with pl. 17a, and E. B. Harrison, *Hesperia* 33(1964), 76ff, with pl. 12d).



is borrowed and adapted to fit the specific dramatic requirements of the play. Alkestis must unveil on stage (i.e. outside the house) because Admetos must recognize her on stage.

I have repeatedly spoken of Alkestis as a character poised between life and death. It remains to consider one last aspect of this point. 'You may speak to her'. Herakles tells Admetos, 'but it is not yet *themis* for you to hear her addressing you, until she has been deconsecrated from the gods below, when the third dawn comes' (1132; 1144-6). The connection between silence, covering the head, and real or symbolic death is not unfamiliar to us. We think perhaps of Benedictine monks, who wear the hood over the head at all times when forbidden to speak; but when they take their final vows, they lie still and prostrate on a pall (not only physically resembling the dead but explicitly 'dying to the world') and have the hood pinned under the chin; they must then keep silence until the hood is unpinned - at Communion, on the third day afterwards<sup>1</sup>. From ancient Greece we have several examples of a congruence between veiling and silence. Aischylos' Niobe sits veiled and silent until the third day<sup>2</sup>; and his Achilles seems to have covered his head and been silent in both *Phrygians* and *Myrmidons* - his silence persisting in the latter case, apparently, till the third day<sup>3</sup>. Euripides' Phaidra is veiled and silent at one point in *Hippolytos* through shame at her polluting state; and it is her third day without food<sup>4</sup>. In *Alkestis* the congruence is only partial: the silence persists for three days a f t e r the unveiling. This is partly a matter of dramatic necessity: as we observed earlier, she h a s to unveil, but there is no compelling reason for her to speak. But her silence is appropriate in ritual terms too, since it marks her unusually anomalous condition. The words of a person in any state of pollution might be harmful to others: as Orestes says in *Eumenides*, 'the law is that the murderer be ἄφθογγος until purified'<sup>5</sup>. But this applies a f o r t i o r i

1. There are further links between the hood and 'death': the monk is surrounded, when prostrate, by 'catafalque' candles; and monks are buried with the hood up. (I am indebted for guidance here to Dr. Ian Hamnett.)

2. *Life of Aischylos*, 6 (=Aisch. fr. 243a Mette); see O. Taplin, 'Aeschylean silences and silences in Aeschylus', *HSCP* 76 (1972) 57-97, at 60-2.

3. The 'third day' detail (cf. Aisch. fr. 212a Mette) is accepted for *Myrmidons* by Taplin (cit. in preceding note, 64). In *Phrygians* Achilles' motive for veiling seems to have been grief; in *Myrmidons* it may have been because of his self-imposed marginality; see Taplin, art. cit., 76.

4. Eur. *Hipp.* 275.

5. *Eum.* 448ff. (For the converse see *Eum.* 276-7 and esp. 287: when Orestes' pollution has gone, he speaks ἀφ' ἀγροῦ στόματος). N. b. also Eur. *I. T.* 951 and 956 for the silence surrounding the polluted Orestes at Athens.



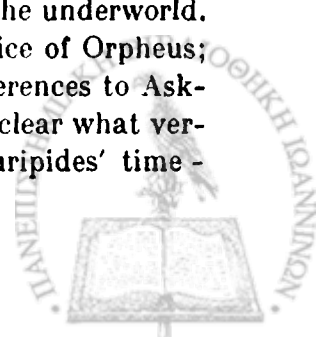
to Alkestis: she has died and been buried. Plutarch notes that anyone for whom carrying-out and burial had been performed, as though he were dead, was considered impure by the Greeks, and they would not let such a person associate with themselves or approach a temple; and Hesychios refers to a ceremony of reenacted birth designed to admit the δευτερόπνοτος back to life<sup>1</sup>. Did a symbolic silence figure in the ritual for managing such a rare and anomalous case, and was Euripides adapting that silence in *Alkestis*? There is, I think, no evidence; and the silence could just as easily have been Euripidean invention, appropriate because of Alkestis' still-dangerous link with the dead. Or could he, here too, have been borrowing from the wedding ritual? When the bride was veiled before the Anakalupteria, did she also have to keep silent, being restored to normal communication only after the unveiling? According to Pollux, an alternative name for the Anakalupteria gifts was προσφθεγκτήρια, 'gifts of salutation'<sup>2</sup>. In any case, we would be dealing, not with a simple 'reflection' of ritual, but with its adaptation to the needs of a given dramatic context.

Even at the end, then, Alkestis is not yet fully alive. Through her fate, the relation between life and death is shown to be in certain respects ambiguous. Now closely related to this ambiguity is what seems to be an outright paradox. The plot is based on the assumption that Death will inevitably get what is due to him: if Admetos does not die, someone else must. Furthermore, there is in the course of the work a series of references to the fixity of the boundary between life and death: (a) the fate of Asklepios (2ff, 122ff; cf. 970), who raised the dead, and was thunderbolted for it; (b) the emphatic words of Herakles at 528 ('Most people reckon there is a big difference between being alive and being dead'); (c) the attitude of the chorus: 'There is no way round Necessity' (962ff), 'You will not raise the dead' (985-6)<sup>3</sup>. And yet *Alkestis* ends with the defeat of Thanatos and the restoration of Alkestis. Is the boundary between life and death not, then, fixed, as we have been led to believe? On this paradox two things should be said.

1. The revived dead: Plut. *Quaest. Rom.* 264f-265a, Hesych. s.v. δευτερόπνοτος. See G.G. Betts, 'The silence of Alkestis', *Mnemosyne*, 4th series, 18 (1965) 181-2, and R. Parker, op. cit. in n. 1, p. 76 above, 61.

2. Pollux 3.36.

3. A word needs to be added about Admetos' assertion (357ff) that, had he the voice of Orpheus, he would have gone down to charm the powers of the underworld. One implication is, of course, that Admetos does not have the voice of Orpheus; hence the outlook in Admetos' own case would seem (as with the references to Asklepios) to be made even more pessimistic. On the other hand, it is not clear what version of the Orpheus/Eurydike story had the greater currency in Euripides' time -





First we must consider who it is that is apparently threatening the boundary between life and death. Of all the figures in Greek myth, Herakles is the one who seems to be licensed most regularly to push beyond boundaries. In particular, he breaks the confines of mortality in two ways: downwardly, by invading Hades and stealing Kerberos; and upwardly, by achieving acceptance into Olympos. In *Alkestis* the boundary between life and death is not abolished or redrawn: 'after' the action of the play, things will remain as they are. It is just that, in one exceptional case, the exceptional hero *par excellence* is able to intervene and postpone (but not, we imagine, cancel) the death of Alkestis.

This leads us to the second point. In the house of Admetos, normal life has at last, we must assume, been reestablished. Normal life - and normal death: the recent suspension of normal relations between life and death has, presumably, come to an end. From the beginning of the play, the relationship between life and death has been in an unusual state, with both the main characters poised in different ways between the two; finally, the usual distance between the extremes is restored<sup>1</sup>. Perhaps one respect in which *Alkestis* asserts itself as a 'fourth play' rather than a tragedy is that, at its conclusion, at least one ambiguity is resolved instead of being left open-ended.

### 3. Herakles

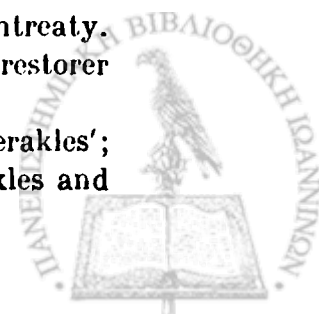
In order to appreciate Herakles' role in *Alkestis* it will be useful first to remind ourselves about his place within Greek mythology as a whole, and the literary tradition in particular<sup>2</sup>.

Herakles was the great 'helper' to whom one could appeal in time of trouble. Myths about him range widely: from the East to the far West, from (as we mentioned) the underworld to Olympos. In other ways too he is associated with the limits of humanity: he is repeatedly connected with animals, which he kills or controls; he has to deal with centaurs (incompletely human) and with Amazons (abnormally human). Sometimes, it is true, Herakles is situated in the social rather than the natural world, as when he sacks the cities of Troy and Oichalia. But here once more he is hardly a comfortably socialized being: he is a disrupter of civilization, a hero whose boundless violence can be a potential threat to order as well as (when he slays monsters) a supporter of it.

did he look back and lose her, or was his mission successful? If the latter alternative were being evoked, the reference to Orpheus might offer a small glimmer of hope that the boundary between life and death can be affected by human entreaty.

1. Justina Gregory appropriately describes Herakles in this play as 'the restorer of differences' ('Euripides' *Alkestis*', *Hermes* 107 (1979) 259-70, at 267).

2. One may consult A. Brelich, *Gli eroi greci*, Rome 1958, index *s.v.* 'Herakles'; G. K. Galinsky, *The Herakles Theme*, Oxford 1972; and M.S. Silk, 'Herakles and Greek tragedy', *G & R* 32 (1985) 1-22.



Literary representations of the hero are heterogeneous. It will be convenient to take three examples.

(a) Praise-poetry. In Pindar Herakles has an honoured place as a representative of athleticism, of ἀρετή, and of a willingness to strive in order to deserve the reward of victory. In return for his exertions he attained peace and rest on Olympos, with Hebe by his side (*Nem.* 1. 69ff). Such ambivalence as there is in the Pindaric Herakles<sup>1</sup> fades before the presentation of the hero as a shining example to emulate.

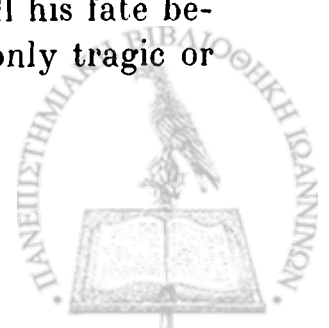
(b) Tragedy. Here Herakles is a much more paradoxical and ambiguous figure. In *Trachiniai*, for instance, he is the monster-slayer who is himself a monster, the mighty hero who is brought so low as to be subservient to the weak (Omphale, Deianira); in *Herakles Mainomenos* he is the hero who is both son of a god and son of a man. In general tragedy explores the darker and more problematic side of Herakles - he is a defender of civilization, yet he can kill his own wife and children, and is only just prevented from killing his father.

(c) Comedy. Once more, of course, we have a different emphasis. Athenaios (411a) gives us a picture of the gluttonous Herakles: 'Epicharmos, for example, says in his *Busiris*: «First, if you should see him eating, you would die. His gullet thunders inside, his jaw rattles, his molar crackles, his canine gnashes, he sizzles at the nostrils, and he waggles his ears»<sup>2</sup>. And in Ion's satyr-play *Omphale* the audience heard that 'not content with the steaks, he ate the charcoal from the grill as well' (Athen. 411b).

Where do we locate *Alkestis* in all this? The Herakles of this play combines the three types which we have reviewed. The mighty athlete praised by Pindar is the heroic figure who strides boldly out to wrestle with Death. The fact that it is with Death that Herakles fights reminds us of the tragic Herakles, whose exploits so often have the profoundest implications for humanity and for the boundary between life and death. And the scene in which the bewildered servant reports the drunken misbehaviour of his unruly guest reminds us of the Herakles of comedy. But it is important that we do not misrepresent the balance between the three aspects of Herakles in *Alkestis*. In particular, we must realise that there is nothing tragic about Herakles' own position. He is on his way to Thrace to perform one of his labours; that is, he is in the middle of his labours. His situation is therefore unproblematic: only when his labours are over, as in *Herakles Mainomenos*, will his fate become precarious. In *Alkestis* he is merely in transit. The only tragic or

1. Cf. Silk (cit. in preceding note), 7.

2. Trans. slightly adapted from Gulick, Loeb edn.



near-tragic events with which he comes into contact are events in the life of the Thessalian household in which he is entertained.

One other question is worth asking before we leave Herakles: why is he not polluted either by entering the house of Admetos when the corpse is still inside, or by his wrestling match with Death? On the first point, no one in the play expresses any criticism of Admetos for exposing Herakles to possible pollution, so we can only conclude that no such pollution was felt to have been incurred—presumably because pollution most strongly affected the deceased's immediate kin, a group to which Herakles clearly did not belong<sup>1</sup>. As for the second point, I suggest that the reason why Apollo (like Artemis in *Hippolytos*) feels compelled to avoid a house where Death is present, while Herakles can go so far as to wrestle with Death, is that, in religious terms, the distance between Apollo and Death is greater than that between Herakles and Death: Apollo is a god of the above, Death a god of the below, and Herakles a figure whose activities span both spheres. With a splendidly structuralist logic, Herakles can operate where Apollo fears to tread.

#### 4. Admetos and hospitality

The issue of how we are to take the character of Admetos has come virtually to dominate criticism of the play. On the one hand there are scholars who detect numerous hints that Admetos' willingness to accept his wife's sacrifice is represented by Euripides in a negative light<sup>2</sup>. On the other hand there are those who prefer a 'naïve' reading, accepting the lines at face value rather than looking between and behind them. My own view coincides with the latter approach, and in particular with the excellent discussion by Burnett<sup>3</sup>. I shall confine myself here to some specific comments in support of a 'non-ironical' reading of *Alkestis*.

A small but significant detail occurs in the scene where the servant tells the chorus about Alkestis' moving farewell to her children, marriage

1. See Garland (cit. in n. 1, p. 103 above), 41, on the varying relationship between pollution and degrees of kinship in Greece.

2. An example is W. D. Smith, 'The ironic structure in *Alkestis*', *Phoenix* 14 (1960) 127-45, who sees the play's apparently positive verdict on Admetos undercut by 'a running commentary which hints at kinds of motivation and qualities of character beneath the surface' (134); on this reading Admetos emerges as 'self-centred, cowardly, and short-sighted' (129). For similarly unflattering views of Admetos see K. von Fritz, *Antike und Moderne Tragödie*, Berlin 1962, 256-321, esp. 310; and E.-R. Schwinge, *Die Verwendung der Stichomythie in den Dramen des Euripides*, Heidelberg 1968, 109.

3. Art. cit. in n. 1, p. 102 above. Another non-ironist is that fine Euripidean A. Rivier; see art. cit. in n. 1, p. 99 above, with sequel at *Mus. Helv.* 30 (1973) 130-43.



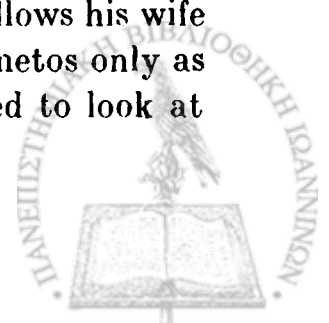
bed and household slaves. Although the chorus are full of praise for Alkestis (150-1), they express sympathy for Admetos too:

ὃ τλῆμον, οἷας οἶος ὄν ἀμαρτάνεις (144)

It would have been perfectly possible for Euripides to have written a play in which Admetos appeared as unpleasantly insensitive as is Jason in *Medea*; but that is not what he has done. Again, nothing in the farewell scene between husband and wife can lead us to regard Admetos as a hypocrite, or to regard his grief as insincere. As a result of his generosity to a god, he has been given a gift; and the gifts of the gods, as Paris reminded Hektor (*Iliad* 3.65), are not to be cast away. Apollo's gift to Admetos was life; and one of the play's paradoxes is that this 'life' is no life at all without the person who made the life possible. But, for most of *Alkestis*, the result of the paradox is sympathy for Admetos, not censure of him. For most of *Alkestis* the question, 'What do we make of a man who allows his wife to die so that he himself may live?' is simply not asked, because that is not what the play is mainly about.

The positive presentation of Admetos is maintained in the episode where he deceives Herakles into accepting hospitality. How are we to evaluate his decision to withhold the truth because he does not wish to fail in his obligations as a ξένος? Euripides does not present it as absurd or foolish. On the contrary, it is - as Herakles himself later recognizes (855ff) - the act of a noble man and a true friend. In a society such as that of ancient Greece, where travellers were bereft of all the social ties which made existence practicable when they were at home, the institution of ξενία was of enormous practical and emotional significance. Hence it was sanctioned by Zeus (Xenios) himself; and its obligations could be ignored only at great peril: in myth, those who break ξενία invariably suffer for it, whether they are behaving as a wicked host in their own house (Tantalos) or as a wicked guest in the house of another (Paris). In presenting Admetos as a good ξένος Euripides was reflecting a fundamental custom of Greek society; although the chorus is at first critical of Admetos, his explanation - he absolutely refuses to turn away a friend - convinces them, and they sing an ode in praise of his nobility.

Then, with a sharp contrast so typical of Euripides, we have the bitter scene between Admetos and Pheres. Now for the first time Euripides confronts us with the moral issue implicit in the starting-point of the plot, namely: what do we make of a man who allows his wife to die so that he himself may live? So far we have seen Admetos only as loving husband and noble host; now suddenly we are forced to look at the other side of the coin - to see him as a murderer:

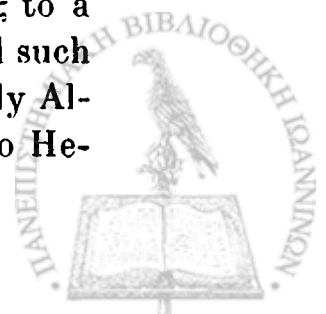


σὺ γοῦν ἀναιδῶς διεμάχου τὸ μὴ θανεῖν,  
καὶ ζῆς παρελθὼν τὴν πεπρωμένην τύχην,  
ταύτην κατακτάς· (694-6)

Whether this scene can outweigh the positive evaluation of Admetos which the play has given us so far is perhaps something which each individual reader or spectator must answer for him- /herself; in my own view it certainly does not. The scene makes Admetos more complex, and therefore more interesting. We see his grief take a new direction, leading him to be fiercely aggressive to his own father. Hence his isolation becomes even more complete. The ground is thus prepared for the truly distressing scene at 861ff when Admetos, returning after the funeral, comes face to face with the empty house. Here once more, as in the early part of the play, we must surely take Admetos' grief as sincere: there is more than a hint of real tragedy in his ἔρπει μανθάνω (940).

How, finally, does the last scene of the play affect our view of Admetos? It is interesting that Herakles gently but firmly expresses criticism of Admetos for concealing the truth: μέμφομαι μὲν, μέμφομαι (1017). The suggestion seems to be that true friendship in fact lies in something more than a mechanical returning of χάρις for χάρις: it should involve a willingness to trust another person and to confide in them. But it is one of the numerous paradoxes of *Alkestis* that Herakles, in the very moment of blaming his φίλος for deceiving him, proceeds immediately to use deceit; and this brings us to the persuasion of Admetos by Herakles.

It has been said that Admetos' agreement to accept what he believes to be 'another woman' into his house is designed by Euripides to seem heavily ironical in view of his earlier promise (328ff) not to remarry. It is of course hard to disprove such a suggestion conclusively; but certain considerations tell against it. Firstly, the resistance of Admetos is extremely lengthy. At line 1020 Herakles instructs him to look after the woman, but only at line 1108 does Admetos consent to her entry into the house; and not until 1118 - almost exactly a hundred lines since the original instruction was given - does he reluctantly agree to take her in himself. Given the compression and stylisation of stichomythia - one may compare the handful of lines in which Klytaimnestra persuades Agamemnon in *Agamemnon* - Euripides can hardly be said to have portrayed Admetos acquiescing readily. Secondly, there is that much more pressure on Admetos to accept because to refuse would be to refuse a χάρις to a friend - and throughout the play we have seen and heard of several such favours which have been presented in a positive light, most notably *Alkestis*' χάρις of life to Admetos and Admetos' χάρις of hospitality to He-



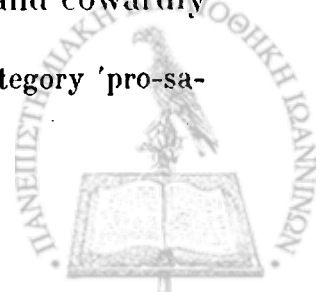
rakles. Thirdly, does it not make a difference that, because of what the audience knows but Admetos does not, the audience wants him to acquiesce? The desired outcome, the outcome which will restore the relationship torn by Alkestis' self-sacrifice and Admetos' grief, the outcome which will enable Herakles worthily to reciprocate Admetos' gift of hospitality - that outcome depends on Admetos' giving way. Often enough in his other works Euripides uses irony to expose the reality behind human pretension; but there is no reason why we should deny him the right to be unironical if that was what the drama required.

### 5. The tone of 'Alkestis': tragedy? comedy? 'fourth play'?

*Alkestis* is unique amongst the surviving works of the Greek tragedians in that it is the only one of which we know both that it was put on fourth and that it was not a satyr-play. Scholars have tried to accommodate this uniqueness by inventing the term 'pro-satyr'; but this does little more than remind us that there is an unusual phenomenon which needs explanation<sup>1</sup>. However, the impulse to coin such a term is not wholly misguided, since it reflects the importance of our being able to reconstruct the category - the mental 'heading' - to which the original audience would have ascribed the play. After all, some sense of what the Athenians would have expected from *Alkestis* is necessary before we can judge how far Euripides met, or perhaps challenged, those expectations. But how do we proceed if we have no other work which we can be certain is a non-satyric fourth play?

*Faute de mieux* we may consider satyr-plays themselves. To answer the question, 'What would the audience have expected from a fifth-century satyr-play?', we have to rely mainly on Sophokles' *Ichneutai* and Euripides' *Kuklops*, the only two examples to have survived in anything like complete form. The subject of *Ichneutai* is the theft of the cattle of Apollo by baby Hermes; helping in the quest for the lost beasts are Silenos and his sons the Satyrs. In other words the plot is, like the plots of tragedy, taken from the mythical past, but bursting into it is a disruptive and indeed farcical element. *Kuklops* too is set in the mythical past, and includes many of the features familiar from *Odyssey* 9: Polyphemos' cannibalism; Odysseus' trick with the name; the blinding; the escape. But into this traditional world of myth there bursts, as before, an element of disruptive farce: once again it is the lustful and cowardly

1. Dana F. Sutton suggests other possible candidates for the category 'pro-satyr'; see *The Greek Satyr Play*, Meisenheim am Glan 1980, 184-90.



Satyrs with their pot-bellied old father. Amongst many amusing moments perhaps the best is when Polyphemos, hopelessly drunk, ominously announces that he prefers boys to women, and carries off the alarmed Silenos into his cave to be his Ganymedes.

The rest of our evidence about satyr-plays<sup>1</sup>, meagre though it is, does not invalidate the assumption that the audience awaiting the start of such a work was expecting something set in the mythical past, but with a disruptively comical element breaking in to disturb the seriousness. But what about non-satyric fourth plays? While we really cannot be dogmatic about audience-expectations in this case, it is at any rate interesting that in *Alkestis* too we find a combination of a mythical setting with an element of disruptive comedy, as Herakles totters on to the stage after enjoying himself in Admetos' wine store.

*Alkestis* is indeed a quite remarkably variegated work. It has many features in common with tragedy: an *oikos* is disrupted; a character is caught in dilemmas (be hospitable, or mourn; accept the gift of life and live empty, or die and render the gift meaningless); events come to a crisis; a father and a son are driven to a bitter scene of mutual recrimination; someone learns the truth too late. On the other hand, Herakles' riotous good spirits, and the loving reconciliation at the end, may make us think rather of comedy. But it has to be said that the serious part of the play far exceeds the light-hearted. Could it be that Euripides was surprising his audience in 438 by providing something darker and more thought-provoking than they were expecting from a fourth play? We have no way of answering the question for certain. It is better simply to rejoice in the particular - indeed unique - range of emotions and tones which make up this rich and complex masterpiece<sup>2</sup>.

1. Recently collected and analysed by Richard Seaford in the introduction to his edn. of *Cyclops*, Oxford 1984.

2. This article had its origins in a lecture given in Greek at the University of Ioannina in spring 1985; I am extremely grateful for the perceptive criticisms made by my audience. A shorter version was read in London at a colloquium organised by the Hellenic Society in honour of Prof. Winnington-Ingram, and again I acknowledge the helpful comments which I received on that occasion.



## ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

### Η ΑΛΚΗΣΤΗ ΤΟΥ ΕΥΡΙΠΙΔΗ: ΠΕΝΤΕ ΕΡΜΗΝΕΥΤΙΚΕΣ ΑΠΟΨΕΙΣ

Στην εργασία μου αυτή προσπαθώ να διαφωτίσω πέντε σημεία της 'Αλκιστης του Ευριπίδη. Τα τρία πρώτα θέματα που εξετάζω συνεπάγονται τη σχέση ανάμεσα στο δράμα και το θρησκευτικό του υπόβαθρο.

1. Η σημασία της θύρας (και συνακόλουθα η σημασία της εισόδου και εξόδου από το σπίτι) μπορεί να γίνει κατανοητή μόνο αν αναγνωρίσουμε το ρόλο της θύρας στις ελληνικές γαμήλιες και νεκρικές τελετές.

2. Άλλο κεντρικό σημείο του δράματος είναι η ενδιάμεση κατάσταση μεταξύ ζωής και θανάτου της ηρωίδας. Κι αυτό πρέπει να γίνει κατανοητό σε σχέση με το ελληνικό τυπικό: ιδιαίτερα με τελετές που συνεπάγονται κάλυψη του προσώπου με πέπλο και σιωπή.

3. Η σωστή κατανόηση του ρόλου του Ηρακλή στην 'Αλκιστη εξαρτάται για μια φορά ακόμη από τη σχέση του έργου με το θρησκευτικό του πλαίσιο, που στην περίπτωση αυτή δεν είναι η τελετουργία αλλά ο μύθος.

Τα δύο υπόλοιπα θέματα θίγουν ζητήματα που έγιναν αντικείμενο φιλολογικής διαμάχης τα τελευταία χρόνια:

4. Ο τρόπος που αναλύω το χαρακτήρα του 'Αδμητου είναι «μη-ειρωνικός». Μόνο στη σκηνή με το Φέρη η αποδοχή της θυσίας της 'Αλκιστης είναι αξιοκατάκριτη. Στο υπόλοιπο έργο παρουσιάζεται ως γενναιόδωρος οικοδεσπότης και θλιμμένος χήρος, κι όχι ως υποκριτής.

5. Ποιός είναι ο τόνος του έργου συνολικά; Με το σατυρικό δράμα έχει κοινό ένα σκηνικό από το μυθικό παρελθόν μ'ένα καταλυτικό κωμικό στοιχείο. Αλλά στην 'Αλκιστη το σοβαρό στοιχείο υπερισχύει σε αντιπαράθεση με το κωμικό. Ίσως ο Ευριπίδης εξέπληξε τους θεατές του δίνοντάς τους κάτι «πιο σκοτεινό» απ' ό,τι περίμεναν.

R. BUXTON

