

Alcestis eBook

Alcestis by Euripides

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Contents

Alcestis eBook.....	1
Contents.....	2
Table of Contents.....	4
Page 1.....	5
Page 2.....	7
Page 3.....	8
Page 4.....	9
Page 5.....	10
Page 6.....	11
Page 7.....	12
Page 8.....	14
Page 9.....	16
Page 10.....	19
Page 11.....	22
Page 12.....	24
Page 13.....	27
Page 14.....	29
Page 15.....	31
Page 16.....	34
Page 17.....	37
Page 18.....	40
Page 19.....	43
Page 20.....	45

Page 21.....	47
Page 22.....	50
Page 23.....	52
Page 24.....	54
Page 25.....	56
Page 26.....	58
Page 27.....	60
Page 28.....	62
Page 29.....	64
Page 30.....	67
Page 31.....	70
Page 32.....	72
Page 33.....	74
Page 34.....	75
Page 35.....	77
Page 36.....	78
Page 37.....	80
Page 38.....	81

Table of Contents

Section	Table of Contents	Page
Start of eBook		1
Title: Alcestis		1
THE ALCESTIS		1
EURIPIDES		1
WITH EXPLANATORY NOTES BY		1
REGIUS PROFESSOR OF GREEK		1
IN THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD		
INTRODUCTION		1
ALCESTIS		7
ALCESTIS		7
CHORUS.		9
NOTES		31
THE END		38

Page 1

Title: *Alcestis*

Author: Euripides

Release Date: December 23, 2003 [EBook #10523]

Language: English

Character set encoding: ASCII

*** *Start of this project gutenber* EBOOK *Alcestis* ***

Produced by Ted Garvin, Charles M. Bidwell and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team.

THE ALCESTIS

OF

EURIPIDES

TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH RHYMING VERSE

WITH EXPLANATORY NOTES BY

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1915

INTRODUCTION

The *Alcestis* would hardly confirm its author's right to be acclaimed "the most tragic of the poets." It is doubtful whether one can call it a tragedy at all. Yet it remains one of the most characteristic and delightful of Euripidean dramas, as well as, by modern standards, the most easilyactable. And I notice that many judges who display nothing but a fierce satisfaction in sending other plays of that author to the block or the treadmill, show a certain human weakness in sentencing the gentle daughter of Pelias.



The play has been interpreted in many different ways. There is the old unsophisticated view, well set forth in Paley's preface of 1872. He regards the *Alcestis* simply as a triumph of pathos, especially of "that peculiar sort of pathos which comes most home to us, with our views and partialities for domestic life.... As for the characters, that of Alcestis must be acknowledged to be pre-eminently beautiful. One could almost imagine that Euripides had not yet conceived that bad opinion of the sex which so many of the subsequent dramas exhibit.... But the rest are hardly well-drawn, or, at least, pleasingly portrayed." "The poet might perhaps, had he pleased, have exhibited Admetus in a more amiable point of view."

This criticism is not very trenchant, but its weakness is due, I think, more to timidity of statement than to lack of perception. Paley does see that a character may be "well-drawn" without necessarily being "pleasing"; and even that he may be eminently pleasing as a part of the play while very displeasing in himself. He sees that Euripides may have had his own reasons for not making Admetus an ideal husband. It seems odd that such points should need mentioning; but Greek drama has always suffered from a school of critics who approach a play with a greater equipment of aesthetic theory than of dramatic perception. This is the characteristic defect of classicism. One mark of the school is to demand from dramatists heroes and heroines which shall satisfy its own ideals; and, though there was in the New Comedy a mask known to Pollux as "The Entirely-good Young Man" ([Greek: *panchraestos neaniskos*]), such a character is fortunately unknown to classical Greek drama.

Page 2

The influence of this “classicist” tradition has led to a timid and unsatisfying treatment of the *Alcestis*, in which many of the most striking and unconventional features of the whole composition were either ignored or smoothed away. As a natural result, various lively-minded readers proceeded to overemphasize these particular features, and were carried into eccentricity or paradox. Alfred Schoene, for instance, fixing his attention on just those points which the conventional critic passed over, decides simply that the *Alcestis* is a parody, and finds it very funny. (*Die Alkestis von Euripides*, Kiel, 1895.)

I will not dwell on other criticisms of this type. There are those who have taken the play for a criticism of contemporary politics or the current law of inheritance. Above all there is the late Dr. Verrall's famous essay in *Euripides the Rationalist*, explaining it as a psychological criticism of a supposed Delphic miracle, and arguing that Alcestis in the play does not rise from the dead at all. She had never really died; she only had a sort of nervous catalepsy induced by all the “suggestion” of death by which she was surrounded. Now Dr. Verrall's work, as always, stands apart. Even if wrong, it has its own excellence, its special insight and its extraordinary awakening power. But in general the effect of reading many criticisms on the *Alcestis* is to make a scholar realize that, for all the seeming simplicity of the play, competent Grecians have been strangely bewildered by it, and that after all there is no great reason to suppose that he himself is more sensible than his neighbours.

This is depressing. None the less I cannot really believe that, if we make patient use of our available knowledge, the *Alcestis* presents any startling enigma. In the first place, it has long been known from the remnants of the ancient Didascalia, or official notice of production, that the *Alcestis* was produced as the fourth play of a series; that is, it took the place of a Satyr-play. It is what we may call Pro-satyr. (See the present writer's introduction to the *Rhesus*.) And we should note for what it is worth the observation in the ancient Greek argument: “The play is somewhat satyr-like ([Greek: saturiphkoteron]). It ends in rejoicing and gladness against the tragic convention.”

Now we are of late years beginning to understand much better what a Satyr-play was. Satyrs have, of course, nothing to do with satire, either etymologically or otherwise. Satyrs are the attendant daemons who form the Komos, or revel rout, of Dionysus. They are represented in divers fantastic forms, the human or divine being mixed with that of some animal, especially the horse or wild goat. Like Dionysus himself, they are connected in ancient religion with the Renewal of the Earth in spring and the resurrection of the dead, a point which students of the *Alcestis* may well remember. But in general they represent mere joyous creatures of nature, unthwarted by law and unchecked by self-control. Two notes are especially struck by them: the passions and the absurdity of half-drunken revellers, and the joy and mystery of the wild things in the forest.

Page 3

The rule was that after three tragedies proper there came a play, still in tragic diction, with a traditional saga plot and heroic characters, in which the Chorus was formed by these Satyrs. There was a deliberate clash, an effect of burlesque; but of course the clash must not be too brutal. Certain characters of the heroic saga are, so to speak, at home with Satyrs and others are not. To take our extant specimens of Satyr-plays, for instance: in the *Cyclops* we have Odysseus, the heroic trickster; in the fragmentary *Ichneutae* of Sophocles we have the Nymph Cyllene, hiding the baby Hermes from the chorus by the most barefaced and pleasant lying; later no doubt there was an entrance of the infant thief himself. Autolycus, Sisyphus, Thersites are all Satyr-play heroes and congenial to the Satyr atmosphere; but the most congenial of all, the one hero who existed always in an atmosphere of Satyrs and the Komos until Euripides made him the central figure of a tragedy, was Heracles. [Footnote: The character of Heracles in connexion with the Komos, already indicated by Wilamowitz and Dieterich (*Herakles*, pp. 98, ff.; *Pulcinella*, pp. 63, ff.), has been illuminatingly developed in an unpublished monograph by Mr. J.A.K. Thomson, of Aberdeen.]

The complete Satyr-play had a hero of this type and a Chorus of Satyrs. But the complete type was refined away during the fifth century; and one stage in the process produced a play with a normal chorus but with one figure of the Satyric or "revelling" type. One might almost say the "comic" type if, for the moment, we may remember that that word is directly derived from 'Komos.'

The *Alcestis* is a very clear instance of this Pro-satyric class of play. It has the regular tragic diction, marked here and there (393, 756, 780, etc.) by slight extravagances and forms of words which are sometimes epic and sometimes over-colloquial; it has a regular saga plot, which had already been treated by the old poet Phrynichus in his *Alcestis*, a play which is now lost but seems to have been Satyric; and it has one character straight from the Satyr world, the heroic reveller, Heracles. It is all in keeping that he should arrive tired, should feast and drink and sing; should be suddenly sobered and should go forth to battle with Death. It is also in keeping that the contest should have a half-grotesque and half-ghastly touch, the grapple amid the graves and the cracking ribs.

* * * * *

So much for the traditional form. As for the subject, Euripides received it from Phrynichus, and doubtless from other sources. We cannot be sure of the exact form of the story in Phrynichus. But apparently it told how Admetus, King of Pherae in Thessaly, received from Apollo a special privilege which the God had obtained, in true Satyric style, by making the Three Fates drunk and cajoling them. This was that, when his appointed time for death came,

Page 4

he might escape if he could find some volunteer to die for him. His father and mother, from whom the service might have been expected, refused to perform it. His wife, Alcestis, though no blood relation, handsomely undertook it and died. But it so happened that Admetus had entertained in his house the demi-god, Heracles; and when Heracles heard what had happened, he went out and wrestled with Death, conquered him, and brought Alcestis home.

Given this form and this story, the next question is: What did Euripides make of them? The general answer is clear: he has applied his usual method. He accepts the story as given in the tradition, and then represents it in his own way. When the tradition in question is really heroic, we know what his way is. He preserves, and even emphasizes, the stateliness and formality of the Attic stage conventions; but, in the meantime, he has subjected the story and its characters to a keener study and a more sensitive psychological judgment than the simple things were originally meant to bear. So that many characters which passed as heroic, or at least presentable, in the kindly remoteness of legend, reveal some strange weakness when brought suddenly into the light. When the tradition is Satyric, as here, the same process produces almost an opposite effect. It is somewhat as though the main plot of a gross and jolly farce were pondered over and made more true to human character till it emerged as a refined and rather pathetic comedy. The making drunk of the Three Grey Sisters disappears; one can only just see the trace of its having once been present. The revelling of Heracles is touched in with the lightest of hands; it is little more than symbolic. And all the figures in the story, instead of being left broadly comic or having their psychology neglected, are treated delicately, sympathetically, with just that faint touch of satire, or at least of amusement, which is almost inseparable from a close interest in character.

What was Admetus really like, this gallant prince who had won the affection of such great guests as Apollo and Heracles, and yet went round asking other people to die for him; who, in particular, accepted his wife's monstrous sacrifice with satisfaction and gratitude? The play portrays him well. Generous, innocent, artistic, affectionate, eloquent, impulsive, a good deal spoilt, unconsciously insincere, and no doubt fundamentally selfish, he hates the thought of dying and he hates losing his wife almost as much. Why need she die? Why could it not have been some one less important to him? He feels with emotion what a beautiful act it would have been for his old father. "My boy, you have a long and happy life before you, and for me the sands are well-nigh run out. Do not seek to dissuade me. I will die for you." Admetus could compose the speech for him. A touching scene, a noble farewell, and all the dreadful trouble solved—so conveniently solved! And the miserable self-blinded old man could not see it!

Page 5

Euripides seems to have taken positive pleasure in Admetus, much as Meredith did in his famous Egoist; but Euripides all through is kinder to his victim than Meredith is. True, Admetus is put to obvious shame, publicly and helplessly. The Chorus make discreet comments upon him. The Handmaid is outspoken about him. One feels that Alcestis herself, for all her tender kindness, has seen through him. Finally, to make things quite clear, his old father fights him openly, tells him home-truth upon home-truth, tears away all his protective screens, and leaves him with his self-respect in tatters. It is a fearful ordeal for Admetus, and, after his first fury, he takes it well. He comes back from his wife's burial a changed man. He says not much, but enough. "I have done wrong. I have only now learnt my lesson. I imagined I could save my happy life by forfeiting my honour; and the result is that I have lost both." I think that a careful reading of the play will show an almost continuous process of self-discovery and self-judgment in the mind of Admetus. He was a man who blinded himself with words and beautiful sentiments; but he was not thick-skinned or thick-witted. He was not a brute or a cynic. And I think he did learn his lesson ... not completely and for ever, but as well as most of us learn such lessons.

The beauty of Alcestis is quite untouched by the dramatist's keener analysis. The strong light only increases its effect. Yet she is not by any means a mere blameless ideal heroine; and the character which Euripides gives her makes an admirable foil to that of Admetus. Where he is passionate and romantic, she is simple and homely. While he is still refusing to admit the facts and beseeching her not to "desert" him, she in a gentle but businesslike way makes him promise to take care of the children and, above all things, not to marry again. She could not possibly trust Admetus's choice. She is sure that the step-mother would be unkind to the children. She might be a horror and beat them (l. 307). And when Admetus has made a thrilling answer about eternal sorrow, and the silencing of lyre and lute, and the statue who shall be his only bride, Alcestis earnestly calls the attention of witnesses to the fact that he has sworn not to marry again. She is not an artist like Admetus. There is poetry in her, because poetry comes unconsciously out of deep feeling, but there is no artistic eloquence. Her love, too, is quite different from his. To him, his love for his wife and children is a beautiful thing, a subject to speak and sing about as well as an emotion to feel. But her love is hardly conscious. She does not talk about it at all. She is merely wrapped up in the welfare of certain people, first her husband and then her children. To a modern romantic reader her insistence that her husband shall not marry again seems hardly delicate. But she does not think about romance or delicacy. To her any neglect to ensure due protection for the children

Page 6

would be as unnatural as to refuse to die for her husband. Indeed, Professor J.L. Myres has suggested that care for the children's future is the guiding motive of her whole conduct. There was first the danger of their being left fatherless, a dire calamity in the heroic age. She could meet that danger by dying herself. Then followed the danger of a stepmother. She meets that by making Admetus swear never to marry. In the long run, I fancy, the effect of gracious loveliness which Alcestis certainly makes is not so much due to any words of her own as to what the Handmaid and the Serving Man say about her. In the final scene she is silent; necessarily and rightly silent, for all tradition knows that those new-risen from the dead must not speak. It will need a long *rite de passage* before she can freely commune with this world again. It is a strange and daring scene between the three of them; the humbled and broken-hearted husband; the triumphant Heracles, kindly and wise, yet still touched by the mocking and blustrous atmosphere from which he sprang; and the silent woman who has seen the other side of the grave. It was always her way to know things but not to speak of them.

The other characters fall easily into their niches. We have only to remember the old Satyric tradition and to look at them in the light of their historical development. Heracles indeed, half-way on his road from the roaring reveller of the Satyr-play to the suffering and erring deliverer of tragedy, is a little foreign to our notions, but quite intelligible and strangely attractive. The same historical method seems to me to solve most of the difficulties which have been felt about Admetus's hospitality. Heracles arrives at the castle just at the moment when Alcestis is lying dead in her room; Admetus conceals the death from him and insists on his coming in and enjoying himself. What are we to think of this behaviour? Is it magnificent hospitality, or is it gross want of tact? The answer, I think, is indicated above.

In the uncritical and boisterous atmosphere of the Satyr-play it was natural hospitality, not especially laudable or surprising. From the analogy of similar stories I suspect that Admetus originally did not know his guest, and received not so much the reward of exceptional virtue as the blessing naturally due to those who entertain angels unawares. If we insist on asking whether Euripides himself, in real life or in a play of his own free invention, would have considered Admetus's conduct to Heracles entirely praiseworthy, the answer will certainly be No, but it will have little bearing on the play. In the *Alcestis*, as it stands, the famous act of hospitality is a datum of the story. Its claims are admitted on the strength of the tradition. It was the act for which Admetus was specially and marvellously rewarded; therefore, obviously, it was an act of exceptional merit and piety. Yet the admission is made with a smile, and more than one suggestion is allowed to float across the scene that in real life such conduct would be hardly wise.

Page 7

Heracles, who rose to tragic rank from a very homely cycle of myth, was apt to bring other homely characters with him. He was a great killer not only of malefactors but of “keres” or bogeys, such as “Old Age” and “Ague” and the sort of “Death” that we find in this play. Thanatos is not a god, not at all a King of Terrors. One may compare him with the dancing skeleton who is called Death in mediaeval writings. When such a figure appears on the tragic stage one asks at once what relation he bears to Hades, the great Olympian king of the unseen. The answer is obvious. Thanatos is the servant of Hades, a “priest” or sacrificer, who is sent to fetch the appointed victims.

The other characters speak for themselves. Certainly Pheres can be trusted to do so, though we must remember that we see him at an unfortunate moment. The aged monarch is not at his best, except perhaps in mere fighting power. I doubt if he was really as cynical as he here professes to be.

* * * * *

In the above criticisms I feel that I may have done what critics are so apt to do. I have dwelt on questions of intellectual interest and perhaps thereby diverted attention from that quality in the play which is the most important as well as by far the hardest to convey; I mean the sheer beauty and delightfulness of the writing. It is the earliest dated play of Euripides which has come down to us. True, he was over forty when he produced it, but it is noticeably different from the works of his old age. The numbers are smoother, the thought less deeply scarred, the language more charming and less passionate. If it be true that poetry is bred out of joy and sorrow, one feels as if more enjoyment and less suffering had gone to the making of the *Alcestis* than to that of the later plays.

ALCESTIS

CHARACTERS OF THE PLAY

ADMETUS, *King of Pherae in Thessaly.*

ALCESTIS, *daughter of Pelias, his wife.*

PHERES, *his father, formerly King but now in retirement.*

TWO CHILDREN, *his son and daughter.*

A MANSERVANT *in his house.*

A HANDMAID.

The Hero HERACLES.

The God APOLLO.

THANATOS *or* DEATH.

CHORUS, *consisting of Elders of Pherae.*



“The play was first performed when Glaukinos was Archon, in the 2nd year of the 85th Olympiad (438 B.C.). Sophocles was first, Euripides second with the Cretan Women, Alcmaeon in Psophis, Telephus and Alcestis.... The play is somewhat Satyric in character.”

ALCESTIS

The scene represents the ancient Castle of ADMETUS near Pherae in Thessaly. It is the dusk before dawn; APOLLO, radiant in the darkness, looks at the Castle.



Page 8

APOLLO.

Admetus' House! 'Twas here I bowed my head
Of old, and chafed not at the bondman's bread,
Though born in heaven. Aye, Zeus to death had hurled
My son, Asclepios, Healer of the World,
Piercing with fire his heart; and in mine ire
I slew his Cyclop churls, who forged the fire.
Whereat Zeus cast me forth to bear the yoke
Of service to a mortal. To this folk
I came, and watched a stranger's herd for pay,
And all his house I have prospered to this day.
For innocent was the Lord I chanced upon
And clean as mine own heart, King Pheres' son,
Admetus. Him I rescued from the grave,
Beguiling the Grey Sisters till they gave
A great oath that Admetus should go free,
Would he but pay to Them Below in fee
Another living soul. Long did he prove
All that were his, and all that owed him love,
But never a soul he found would yield up life
And leave the sunlight for him, save his wife:
Who, even now, down the long galleries
Is borne, death-wounded; for this day it is
She needs must pass out of the light and die.
And, seeing the stain of death must not come nigh
My radiance, I must leave this house I love.
But ha! The Headsman of the Pit, above
Earth's floor, to ravish her! Aye, long and late
He hath watched, and cometh at the fall of fate.

Enter from the other side THANATOS; a crouching black-haired and winged figure, carrying a drawn sword. He starts in revulsion on seeing APOLLO.

THANATOS.

Aha!

Why here? What mak'st thou at the gate,
Thou Thing of Light? Wilt overtread
The eternal judgment, and abate
And spoil the portions of the dead?
'Tis not enough for thee to have blocked
In other days Admetus' doom
With craft of magic wine, which mocked
The three grey Sisters of the Tomb;
But now once more



I see thee stand at watch, and shake
That arrow-armed hand to make
This woman thine, who swore, who swore,
To die now for her husband's sake.

APOLLO.
Fear not.
I bring fair words and seek but what is just.

THANATOS (*sneering*)
And if words help thee not, an arrow must?

APOLLO.
'Tis ever my delight to bear this bow.

THANATOS.
And aid this house unjustly? Aye, 'tis so.

APOLLO.
I love this man, and grieve for his dismay.

THANATOS.
And now wilt rob me of my second prey!

APOLLO.
I never robbed thee, neither then nor now.

THANATOS.
Why is Admetus here then, not below?

APOLLO.
He gave for ransom his own wife, for whom ...

THANATOS (*interrupting*).
I am come; and straight will bear her to the tomb.

APOLLO.
Go, take her.—I can never move thine heart.

THANATOS (*mocking*).
To slay the doomed?—Nay; I will do my part.



Page 9

APOLLO.

No. To keep death for them that linger late.

THANATOS (*still mocking*).

'Twould please thee, so?... I owe thee homage great.

APOLLO.

Ah, then she may yet ... she may yet grow old?

THANATOS (*with a laugh*).

No!... I too have my rights, and them I hold.

APOLLO.

'Tis but one life thou gainest either-wise.

THANATOS.

When young souls die, the richer is my prize.

APOLLO.

Old, with great riches they will bury her.

THANATOS.

Fie on thee, fie! Thou rich-man's lawgiver!

APOLLO.

How? Is there wit in Death, who seemed so blind?

THANATOS.

The rich would buy long life for all their kind.

APOLLO.

Thou will not grant me, then, this boon? 'Tis so?

THANATOS.

Thou knowest me, what I am: I tell thee, no!

APOLLO.

I know gods sicken at thee and men pine.

THANATOS.

Begone! Too many things not meant for thine
Thy greed hath conquered; but not all, not all!

APOLLO.

I swear, for all thy bitter pride, a fall



Awaits thee. One even now comes conquering
Towards this house, sent by a southland king
To fetch him four wild coursers, of the race
Which rend men's bodies in the winds of Thrace.
This house shall give him welcome good, and he
Shall wrest this woman from thy worms and thee.
So thou shalt give me all, and thereby win
But hatred, not the grace that might have been.

[Exit APOLLO.]

THANATOS.

Talk on, talk on! Thy threats shall win no bride
From me.—This woman, whatsoe'er betide,
Shall lie in Hades' house. Even at the word
I go to lay upon her hair my sword.
For all whose head this grey sword visiteth
To death are hallowed and the Lords of death.

[THANATOS goes into the house. Presently, as the day grows lighter, the CHORUS enters: it consists of Citizens of Pherae, who speak severally.]

CHORUS.

LEADER.

Quiet, quiet, above, beneath!

SECOND ELDER.

The house of Admetus holds its breath.

THIRD ELDER.

And never a King's friend near,
To tell us either of tears to shed
For Pelias' daughter, crowned and dead;
Or joy, that her eyes are clear.
Bravest, truest of wives is she
That I have seen or the world shall see.

DIVERS CITIZENS, *conversing*.

(The dash — indicates a new speaker.)

—Hear ye no sob, or noise of hands
Beating the breast? No mourners' cries
For one they cannot save?
—Nothing: and at the door there stands
No handmaid.—Help, O Paian; rise,
O star beyond the wave!

—Dead, and this quiet? No, it cannot be.

—Dead, dead!—Not gone to burial secretly!



Page 10

—Why? I still fear: what makes your speech so brave?

—Admetus cast that dear wife to the grave

Alone, with none to see?

—I see no bowl of clear spring water.

It ever stands before the dread

Door where a dead man rests.

—No lock of shorn hair! Every daughter

Of woman shears it for the dead.

No sound of bruised breasts!

—Yet 'tis this very day ...—This very day?

—The Queen should pass and lie beneath the clay.

—It hurts my life, my heart!—All honest hearts

Must sorrow for a brightness that departs,

A good life worn away.

LEADER.

To wander o'er leagues of land,

To search over wastes of sea,

Where the Prophets of Lycia stand,

Or where Ammon's daughters three

Make runes in the rainless sand,

For magic to make her free—

Ah, vain! for the end is here;

Sudden it comes and sheer.

What lamb on the altar-strand

Stricken shall comfort me?

SECOND ELDER.

Only, only one, I know:

Apollo's son was he,

Who healed men long ago.

Were he but on earth to see,

She would rise from the dark below

And the gates of eternity.

For men whom the Gods had slain

He pitied and raised again;

Till God's fire laid him low,

And now, what help have we?

OTHERS.

All's done that can be. Every vow

Full paid; and every altar's brow



Full crowned with spice of sacrifice.
No help remains nor respite now.

Enter from the Castle a HANDMAID, almost in tears.

LEADER.

But see, a handmaid cometh, and the tear
Wet on her cheek! What tidings shall we hear?...

Thy grief is natural, daughter, if some ill
Hath fallen to-day. Say, is she living still
Or dead, your mistress? Speak, if speak you may.

MAID.

Alive. No, dead.... Oh, read it either way.

LEADER.

Nay, daughter, can the same soul live and die?

MAID.

Her life is broken; death is in her eye.

LEADER.

Poor King, to think what she was, and what thou!

MAID.

He never knew her worth.... He will know it now.

LEADER.

There is no hope, methinks, to save her still?

MAID.

The hour is come, and breaks all human will.

LEADER.

She hath such tendance as the dying crave?

MAID.

For sure: and rich robes ready for her grave.

LEADER.

'Fore God, she dies high-hearted, aye, and far
In honour raised above all wives that are!

MAID.

Far above all! How other? What must she,
Who seeketh to surpass this woman, be?
Or how could any wife more shining make
Her lord's love, than by dying for his sake?

But thus much all the city knows. 'Tis here,
In her own rooms, the tale will touch thine ear
With strangeness. When she knew the day was come,

Page 11

She rose and washed her body, white as foam,
With running water; then the cedarn press
She opened, and took forth her funeral dress
And rich adornment. So she stood arrayed
Before the Hearth-Fire of her home, and prayed:
“Mother, since I must vanish from the day,
This last, last time I kneel to thee and pray;
Be mother to my two children! Find some dear
Helpmate for him, some gentle lord for her.
And let not them, like me, before their hour
Die; let them live in happiness, in our
Old home, till life be full and age content.”

To every household altar then she went
And made for each his garland of the green
Boughs of the wind-blown myrtle, and was seen
Praying, without a sob, without a tear.
She knew the dread thing coming, but her clear
Cheek never changed: till suddenly she fled
Back to her own chamber and bridal bed:
Then came the tears and she spoke all her thought.

“O bed, whereon my laughing girlhood’s knot
Was severed by this man, for whom I die,
Farewell! ’Tis thou ... I speak not bitterly....
’Tis thou hast slain me. All alone I go
Lest I be false to him or thee. And lo,
Some woman shall lie here instead of me—
Happier perhaps; more true she cannot be.”

She kissed the pillow as she knelt, and wet
With flooding tears was that fair coverlet.

At last she had had her fill of weeping; then
She tore herself away, and rose again,
Walking with downcast eyes; yet turned before
She had left the room, and cast her down once more
Kneeling beside the bed. Then to her side
The children came, and clung to her and cried,
And her arms hugged them, and a long good-bye
She gave to each, like one who goes to die.
The whole house then was weeping, every slave
In sorrow for his mistress. And she gave
Her hand to all; aye, none so base was there



She gave him not good words and he to her.
So on Admetus falls from either side
Sorrow. 'Twere bitter grief to him to have died
Himself; and being escaped, how sore a woe
He hath earned instead—Ah, some day he shall know!

LEADER.

Surely Admetus suffers, even to-day,
For this true-hearted love he hath cast away?

MAID.

He weeps; begs her not leave him desolate,
And holds her to his heart—too late, too late!
She is sinking now, and there, beneath his eye
Fading, the poor cold hand falls languidly,
And faint is all her breath. Yet still she fain
Would look once on the sunlight—once again
And never more. I will go in and tell
Thy presence. Few there be, will serve so well
My master and stand by him to the end.
But thou hast been from olden days our friend.

[The MAID goes in.]

CHORUS.

THIRD ELDER.

O Zeus,
What escape and where
From the evil thing?
How break the snare
That is round our King?



Page 12

SECOND ELDER.

Ah list!

One cometh?... No.

Let us no more wait;

Make dark our raiment

And shear this hair.

LEADER.

Aye, friends!

'Tis so, even so.

Yet the gods are great

And may send allayment.

To prayer, to prayer!

ALL (*praying*).

O Paian wise!

Some healing of this home devise, devise!

Find, find.... Oh, long ago when we were blind

Thine eyes saw mercy ... find some healing breath!

Again, O Paian, break the chains that bind;

Stay the red hand of Death!

LEADER.

Alas!

What shame, what dread,

Thou Pheres' son,

Shalt be harvested

When thy wife is gone!

SECOND ELDER.

Ah me;

For a deed less drear

Than this thou ruest

Men have died for sorrow;

Aye, hearts have bled.

THIRD ELDER.

'Tis she;

Not as men say dear,

But the dearest, truest,

Shall lie ere morrow

Before thee dead!



ALL.

But lo! Once more!
She and her husband moving to the door!
Cry, cry! And thou, O land of Pherae, hearken!
The bravest of women sinketh, perisheth,
Under the green earth, down where the shadows darken,
Down to the House of Death!

[During the last words ADMETUS and ALCESTIS have entered. ALCESTIS is supported by her Handmaids and followed by her two children.]

LEADER.

And who hath said that Love shall bring
More joy to man than fear and strife?
I knew his perils from of old,
I know them now, when I behold
The bitter faring of my King,
Whose love is taken, and his life
Left evermore an empty thing.

ALCESTIS.

O Sun, O light of the day that falls!
O running cloud that races along the sky!

ADMETUS.

They look on thee and me, a stricken twain,
Who have wrought no sin that God should have thee slain.

ALCESTIS.

Dear Earth, and House of sheltering walls,
And wedded homes of the land where my fathers lie!

ADMETUS.

Fail not, my hapless one. Be strong, and pray
The o'er-mastering Gods to hate us not alway.

ALCESTIS (*faintly, her mind wandering*).

A boat two-oared, upon water; I see, I see.
And the Ferryman of the Dead,
His hand that hangs on the pole, his voice that cries;
"Thou lingerest; come. Come quickly, we wait for thee."
He is angry that I am slow; he shakes his head.

ADMETUS.

Alas, a bitter boat-faring for me,
My bride ill-starred.—Oh, this is misery!



ALCESTIS (*as before*).

Drawing, drawing! 'Tis some one that draweth me ...

To the Palaces of the Dead.

So dark. The wings, the eyebrows and ah, the eyes!...

Go back! God's mercy! What seekest thou? Let me be!...

(*Recovering*) Where am I? Ah, and what paths are these I tread?



Page 13

ADMETUS.

Grievous for all who love thee, but for me
And my two babes most hard, most solitary.

ALCESTIS.

Hold me not; let me lie.—
I am too weak to stand; and Death is near,
And a slow darkness stealing on my sight.
My little ones, good-bye.
Soon, soon, and mother will be no more here....
Good-bye, two happy children in the light.

ADMETUS.

Oh, word of pain, oh, sharper ache
Than any death of mine had brought!
For the Gods' sake, desert me not,
For thine own desolate children's sake.
Nay, up! Be brave. For if they rend
Thee from me, I can draw no breath;
In thy hand are my life and death,
Thine, my beloved and my friend!

ALCESTIS.

Admetus, seeing what way my fortunes lie,
I fain would speak with thee before I die.
I have set thee before all things; yea, mine own
Life beside thine was naught. For this alone
I die.... Dear Lord, I never need have died.
I might have lived to wed some prince of pride,
Dwell in a king's house.... Nay, how could I, torn
From thee, live on, I and my babes forlorn?
I have given to thee my youth—not more nor less,
But all—though I was full of happiness.
Thy father and mother both—'tis strange to tell—
Had failed thee, though for them the deed was well,
The years were ripe, to die and save their son,
The one child of the house: for hope was none,
If thou shouldst pass away, of other heirs.
So thou and I had lived through the long years,
Both. Thou hadst not lain sobbing here alone
For a dead wife and orphan babes.... 'Tis done
Now, and some God hath wrought out all his will.
Howbeit I now will ask thee to fulfill
One great return-gift—not so great withal



As I have given, for life is more than all;
But just and due, as thine own heart will tell.
For thou hast loved our little ones as well
As I have.... Keep them to be masters here
In my old house; and bring no stepmother
Upon them. She might hate them. She might be
Some baser woman, not a queen like me,
And strike them with her hand. For mercy, spare
Our little ones that wrong. It is my prayer....
They come into a house: they are all strife
And hate to any child of the dead wife....
Better a serpent than a stepmother!
A boy is safe. He has his father there
To guard him. But a little girl! (*Taking the LITTLE GIRL
to her*) What good
And gentle care will guide thy maidenhood?
What woman wilt thou find at father's side?
One evil word from her, just when the tide
Of youth is full, would wreck thy hope of love.
And no more mother near, to stand above
Thy marriage-bed, nor comfort thee pain-tossed
In travail, when one needs a mother most!
Seeing I must die.... 'Tis here, across my way,
Not for the morrow, not for the third day,
But now—Death, and to lie with things that were.
Farewell. God keep you happy.—Husband dear,
Remember that I failed thee not; and you,
My children, that your mother loved you true.



Page 14

LEADER.

Take comfort. Ere thy lord can speak, I swear,
If truth is in him, he will grant thy prayer.

ADMETUS.

He will, he will! Oh, never fear for me.
Mine hast thou been, and mine shalt ever be,
Living and dead, thou only. None in wide
Hellas but thou shalt be Admetus' bride.
No race so high, no face so magic-sweet
Shall ever from this purpose turn my feet.
And children ... if God grant me joy of these,
'Tis all I ask; of thee no joy nor ease
He gave me. And thy mourning I will bear
Not one year of my life but every year,
While life shall last.... My mother I will know
No more. My father shall be held my foe.
They brought the words of love but not the deed,
While thou hast given thine all, and in my need
Saved me. What can I do but weep alone,
Alone always, when such a wife is gone?...

An end shall be of revel, and an end
Of crowns and song and mirth of friend with friend,
Wherewith my house was glad. I ne'er again
Will touch the lute nor ease my heart from pain
With pipes of Afric. All the joys I knew,
And joys were many, thou hast broken in two.
Oh, I will find some artist wondrous wise
Shall mould for me thy shape, thine hair, thine eyes,
And lay it in thy bed; and I will lie
Close, and reach out mine arms to thee, and cry
Thy name into the night, and wait and hear
My own heart breathe: "Thy love, thy love is near."
A cold delight; yet it might ease the sum
Of sorrow.... And good dreams of thee will come
Like balm. 'Tis sweet, even in a dream, to gaze
On a dear face, the moment that it stays.

O God, if Orpheus' voice were mine, to sing
To Death's high Virgin and the Virgin's King,
Till their hearts failed them, down would I my path
Cleave, and naught stay me, not the Hound of Wrath,
Not the grey oarsman of the ghostly tide,
Till back to sunlight I had borne my bride.



But now, wife, wait for me till I shall come
Where thou art, and prepare our second home.
These ministers in that same cedar sweet
Where thou art laid will lay me, feet to feet,
And head to head, oh, not in death from thee
Divided, who alone art true to me!

LEADER.

This life-long sorrow thou hast sworn, I too,
Thy friend, will bear with thee. It is her due.

ALCESTIS.

Children, ye heard his promise? He will wed
No other woman nor forget the dead.

ADMETUS.

Again I promise. So it shall be done.

ALCESTIS (*giving the children into his arms one after the other*).
On that oath take my daughter: and my son.

ADMETUS.

Dear hand that gives, I accept both gift and vow.

ALCESTIS.

Thou, in my place, must be their mother now.

ADMETUS.

Else were they motherless—I needs must try.

ALCESTIS.

My babes, I ought to live, and lo, I die.



Page 15

ADMETUS.

And how can I, forlorn of thee, live on?

ALCESTIS.

Time healeth; and the dead are dead and gone.

ADMETUS.

Oh, take me with thee to the dark below,
Me also!

ALCESTIS.

'Tis enough that one should go.

ADMETUS.

O Fate, to have cheated me of one so true!

ALCESTIS (*her strength failing*).

There comes a darkness: a great burden, too.

ADMETUS.

I am lost if thou wilt leave me.... Wife! Mine own!

ALCESTIS.

I am not thy wife; I am nothing. All is gone.

ADMETUS.

Thy babes! Thou wilt not leave them.—Raise thine eye.

ALCESTIS.

I am sorry.... But good-bye, children; good-bye.

ADMETUS.

Look at them! Wake and look at them!

ALCESTIS.

I must go.

ADMETUS.

What? Dying!

ALCESTIS.

Farewell, husband! [*She dies.*]

ADMETUS (*with a cry*).

Ah!... Woe, woe!



LEADER.

Admetus' Queen is dead!

[While ADMETUS is weeping silently, and the CHORUS veil their faces, the LITTLE BOY runs up to his dead Mother.]

LITTLE BOY.

Oh, what has happened? Mummy has gone away,

And left me and will not come back any more!

Father, I shall be lonely all the day...

Look! Look! Her eyes ... and her arms not like before,

How they lie ...

Mother! Oh, speak a word!

Answer me, answer me, Mother! It is I.

I am touching your face. It is I, your little bird.

ADMETUS *(recovering himself and going to the Child)*.

She hears us not, she sees us not. We lie

Under a heavy grief, child, thou and I.

LITTLE BOY.

I am so little, Father, and lonely and cold

Here without Mother. It is too hard.... And you,

Poor little sister, too.

Oh, Father!

Such a little time we had her. She might have stayed

On till we all were old....

Everything is spoiled when Mother is dead.

[The LITTLE BOY is taken away, with his Sister, sobbing.]

LEADER.

My King, thou needs must gird thee to the worst.

Thou shalt not be the last, nor yet the first,

To lose a noble wife. Be brave, and know

To die is but a debt that all men owe.

ADMETUS.

I know. It came not without doubts and fears,

This thing. The thought hath poisoned all my years.

Howbeit, I now will make the burial due

To this dead Queen. Be assembled, all of you;

And, after, raise your triumph-song to greet

This pitiless Power that yawns beneath our feet.

Meantime let all in Thessaly who dread

My sceptre join in mourning for the dead

With temples sorrow-shorn and sable weed.



Ye chariot-lords, ye spurrers of the steed,
Shear close your horses' manes! Let there be found
Through all my realm no lute, nor lyre, nor sound
Of piping, till twelve moons are at an end.
For never shall I lose a closer friend,
Nor braver in my need. And worthy is she
Of honour, who alone hath died for me.



Page 16

[*The body of ALCESTIS is carried into the house by mourners; ADMETUS follows it.*]

CHORUS.

Daughter of Pelias, fare thee well,
May joy be thine in the Sunless Houses!
For thine is a deed which the Dead shall tell
Where a King black-browed in the gloom carouses;
And the cold grey hand at the helm and oar
Which guideth shadows from shore to shore,
Shall bear this day o'er the Tears that Well,
A Queen of women, a spouse of spouses.

Minstrels many shall praise thy name
With lyre full-strung and with voices lyreless,
When Mid-Moon riseth, an orb'd flame,
And from dusk to dawning the dance is tireless;
And Carnos cometh to Sparta's call,
And Athens shineth in festival;
For thy death is a song, and a fullness of fame,
Till the heart of the singer is left desireless.

LEADER.

Would I could reach thee, oh,
Reach thee and save, my daughter,
Starward from gulfs of Hell,
Past gates, past tears that swell,
Where the weak oar climbs thro'
The night and the water!

SECOND ELDER.

Beloved and lonely one,
Who feared not dying:
Gone in another's stead
Alone to the hungry dead:
Light be the carved stone
Above thee lying!

THIRD ELDER.

Oh, he who should seek again
A new bride after thee,
Were loathed of thy children twain,
And loathed of me.



LEADER.

Word to his mother sped,
Praying to her who bore him;
Word to his father, old,
Heavy with years and cold;
“Quick, ere your son be dead!
What dare ye for him?”

SECOND ELDER.

Old, and they dared not; grey,
And they helped him never!
'Twas she, in her youth and pride,
Rose up for her lord and died.
Oh, love of two hearts that stay
One-knit for ever....

THIRD ELDER.

'Tis rare in the world! God send
Such bride in my house to be;
She should live life to the end,
Not fail through me.

[As the song ceases there enters a stranger, walking strongly, but travel-stained, dusty, and tired. His lion-skin and club show him to be HERACLES.]

HERACLES.

Ho, countrymen! To Pherae am I come
By now? And is Admetus in his home?

LEADER.

Our King is in his house, Lord Heracles.—
But say, what need brings thee in days like these
To Thessaly and Pherae's walled ring?

HERACLES.

A quest I follow for the Argive King.

LEADER.

What prize doth call thee, and to what far place?

HERACLES.

The horses of one Diomedes, in Thrace.

LEADER.

But how...? Thou know'st not? Is he strange to thee?

HERACLES.

Quite strange. I ne'er set foot in Bistony.

LEADER.

Not without battle shalt thou win those steeds.

HERACLES.

So be it! I cannot fail my master's needs.



Page 17

LEADER.

'Tis slay or die, win or return no more.

HERACLES.

Well, I have looked on peril's face before.

LEADER.

What profit hast thou in such manslaying?

HERACLES.

I shall bring back the horses to my King.

LEADER.

'Twere none such easy work to bridle them.

HERACLES.

Not easy? Have they nostrils breathing flame?

LEADER.

They tear men's flesh; their jaws are swift with blood.

HERACLES.

Men's flesh! 'Tis mountain wolves', not horses' food!

LEADER.

Thou wilt see their mangers clogged with blood, like mire.

HERACLES.

And he who feeds such beasts, who was his sire?

LEADER.

Ares, the war-lord of the Golden Targe.

HERACLES.

Enough!—This labour fitteth well my large
Fortune, still upward, still against the wind.
How often with these kings of Ares' kind
Must I do battle? First the dark wolf-man,
Lycaon; then 'twas he men called The Swan;
And now this man of steeds!... Well, none shall see
Alcmena's son turn from his enemy.

LEADER.

Lo, as we speak, this land's high governor,
Admetus, cometh from his castle door.



Enter ADMETUS from the Castle.

ADMETUS.

Zeus-born of Perseid line, all joy to thee!

HERACLES.

Joy to Admetus, Lord of Thessaly!

ADMETUS.

Right welcome were she!—But thy love I know.

HERACLES.

But why this mourning hair, this garb of woe?

ADMETUS (*in a comparatively light tone*).

There is a burial I must make to-day.

HERACLES.

God keep all evil from thy children!

ADMETUS.

Nay,

My children live.

HERACLES.

Thy father, if 'tis he,

Is ripe in years.

ADMETUS.

He liveth, friend, and she

Who bore me.

HERACLES.

Surely not thy wife? 'Tis not
Alcestis?

ADMETUS (*his composure a little shaken*).

Ah; two answers share my thought,
Questioned of her.

HERACLES.

Is she alive or dead?

ADMETUS.

She is, and is not; and my heart hath bled
Long years for her.



HERACLES.

I understand no more.
Thy words are riddles.

ADMETUS.

Heard'st thou not of yore
The doom that she must meet?

HERACLES.

I know thy wife
Has sworn to die for thee.

ADMETUS.

And is it life,
To live with such an oath hung o'er her head?

HERACLES (*relieved*).

Ah,
Weep not too soon, friend. Wait till she be dead.

ADMETUS.

He dies who is doomed to die; he is dead who dies.



Page 18

HERACLES.

The two are different things in most men's eyes.

ADMETUS.

Decide thy way, lord, and let me decide
The other way.

HERACLES.

Who is it that has died?
Thou weepest.

ADMETUS.

'Tis a woman. It doth take
My memory back to her of whom we spake.

HERACLES.

A stranger, or of kin to thee?

ADMETUS.

Not kin,
But much beloved.

HERACLES.

How came she to be in
Thy house to die?

ADMETUS.

Her father died, and so
She came to us, an orphan, long ago.

HERACLES (*as though about to depart*).

'Tis sad.
I would I had found thee on a happier day.

ADMETUS.

Thy words have some intent: what wouldst thou say?

HERACLES.

I must find harbour with some other friend.

ADMETUS.

My prince, it may not be! God never send
Such evil!



HERACLES.

'Tis great turmoil, when a guest
Comes to a mourning house.

ADMETUS.

Come in and rest.
Let the dead die!

HERACLES.

I cannot, for mere shame,
Feast beside men whose eyes have tears in them.

ADMETUS.

The guest-rooms are apart where thou shalt be.

HERACLES.

Friend, let me go. I shall go gratefully.

ADMETUS.

Thou shalt not enter any door but mine.

(To an Attendant)

Lead in our guest. Unlock the furthest line
Of guest-chambers; and bid the stewards there
Make ready a full feast; then close with care
The midway doors. 'Tis unmeet, if he hears
Our turmoil or is burdened with our tears.

[The Attendant leads HERACLES into the house.]

LEADER.

How, master? When within a thing so sad
Lies, thou wilt house a stranger? Art thou mad?

ADMETUS.

And had I turned the stranger from my door,
Who sought my shelter, hadst thou praised me more?
I trow not, if my sorrow were thereby
No whit less, only the more friendless I.
And more, when bards tell tales, were it not worse
My house should lie beneath the stranger's curse?
Now he is my sure friend, if e'er I stand
Lonely in Argos, in a thirsty land.

LEADER.

Thou callest him thy friend; how didst thou dare
Keep hid from him the burden of thy care?



ADMETUS.

He never would have entered, had he known
My grief.—Aye, men may mock what I have done,
And call me fool. My house hath never learned
To fail its friend, nor seen the stranger spurned.

[ADMETUS *goes into the house*]

CHORUS.

Oh, a House that loves the stranger,
And a House for ever free!
And Apollo, the Song-changer,
Was a herdsman in thy fee;
Yea, a-piping he was found,
Where the upward valleys wound,
To the kine from out the manger
And the sheep from off the lea,
And love was upon Othrys at the sound.



Page 19

And from deep glens un beholden
Of the forest to his song
There came lynxes streaky-golden,
There came lions in a throng,
Tawny-coated, ruddy-eyed,
To that piper in his pride;
And shy fawns he would embolden,
Dappled dancers, out along
The shadow by the pine-tree's side.

And those magic pipes a-blowing
Have fulfilled thee in thy reign
By thy Lake with honey flowing,
By thy sheepfolds and thy grain;
Where the Sun turns his steeds
To the twilight, all the meads
Of Molossus know thy sowing
And thy ploughs upon the plain.
Yea, and eastward thou art free
To the portals of the sea,
And Pelion, the unharboured, is but minister to thee.

He hath opened wide his dwelling
To the stranger, though his ruth
For the dead was fresh and welling,
For the loved one of his youth.
'Tis the brave heart's cry:
"I will fail not, though I die!"
Doth it win, with no man's telling,
Some high vision of the truth?
We may marvel. Yet I trust,
When man seeketh to be just
And to pity them that wander, God will raise him from the dust.

[As the song ceases the doors are thrown open and ADMETUS comes before them: a great funeral procession is seen moving out.]

ADMETUS.
Most gentle citizens, our dead is here
Made ready; and these youths to bear the bier
Uplifted to the grave-mound and the urn.
Now, seeing she goes forth never to return,
Bid her your last farewell, as mourners may.

[The procession moves forward, past him.]

LEADER.

Nay, lord; thy father, walking old and grey;
And followers bearing burial gifts and brave
Gauds, which men call the comfort of the grave.

Enter PHERES with followers bearing robes and gifts.

PHERES.

I come in sorrow for thy sorrow, son.
A faithful wife indeed thou hast lost, and one
Who ruled her heart. But, howso hard they be,
We needs must bear these griefs.—Some gifts for thee
Are here.... Yes; take them. Let them go beneath
The sod. We both must honour her in death,
Seeing she hath died, my son, that thou mayst live
Nor I be childless. Aye, she would not give
My soul to a sad old age, mourning for thee.
Methinks she hath made all women's life to be
A nobler thing, by one great woman's deed.
Thou saviour of my son, thou staff in need
To our wrecked age, farewell! May some good life
Be thine still in the grave.—Oh, 'tis a wife
Like this man needs; else let him stay unwed!

[The old man has not noticed ADMETUS'S gathering indignation.]



Page 20

ADMETUS.

I called not thee to burial of my dead,
Nor count thy presence here a welcome thing.
My wife shall wear no robe that thou canst bring,
Nor needs thy help in aught. There was a day
We craved thy love, when I was on my way
Deathward—thy love, which bade thee stand aside
And watch, grey-bearded, while a young man died!
And now wilt mourn for her? Thy fatherhood!
Thou wast no true begetter of my blood,
Nor she my mother who dares call me child.
Oh, she was barren ever; she beguiled
Thy folly with some bastard of a thrall.
Here is thy proof! This hour hath shown me all
Thou art; and now I am no more thy son.

'Fore God, among all cowards can scarce be one
Like thee. So grey, so near the boundary
Of mortal life, thou wouldst not, durst not, die
To save thy son! Thou hast suffered her to do
Thine office, her, no kin to me nor you,
Yet more than kin! Henceforth she hath all the part
Of mother, yea, and father in my heart.

And what a glory had been thine that day,
Dying to save thy son—when, either way,
Thy time must needs be brief. Thy life has had
Abundance of the things that make men glad;
A crown that came to thee in youth; a son
To do thee worship and maintain thy throne—
Not like a childless king, whose folk and lands
Lie helpless, to be torn by strangers' hands.

Wilt say I failed in duty to thine age;
For that thou hast let me die? Not so; most sage,
Most pious I was, to mother and to thee;
And thus ye have paid me! Well, I counsel ye.
Lose no more time. Get quick another son
To foster thy last years, to lay thee on
Thy bier, when dead, and wrap thee in thy pall.
I will not bury thee. I am, for all
The care thou hast shown me, dead. If I have found
Another, true to save me at the bound
Of life and death, that other's child am I,
That other's fostering friend, until I die.

How falsely do these old men pray for death,



Cursing their weight of years, their weary breath!
When Death comes close, there is not one that dares
To die; age is forgot and all its cares.

LEADER.

Oh, peace! Enough of sorrow in our path
Is strewn. Thou son, stir not thy father's wrath.

PHERES.

My son, whom seekest thou ... some Lydian thrall,
Or Phrygian, bought with cash?... to affright withal
By cursing? I am a Thessalian, free,
My father a born chief of Thessaly;
And thou most insolent. Yet think not so
To fling thy loud lewd words at me and go.

I got thee to succeed me in my hall,
I have fed thee, clad thee. But I have no call
To die for thee. Not in our family,
Not in all Greece, doth law bid fathers die
To save their sons. Thy road of life is thine
None other's, to rejoice at or repine.
All that was owed to thee by us is paid.
My throne is thine. My broad lands shall be made

Page 21

Thine, as I had them from my father.... Say,
How have I wronged thee? What have I kept away?
“Not died for thee?”... I ask not thee to die.

Thou lovest this light: shall I not love it, I?...

’Tis age on age there, in the dark; and here
My sunlit time is short, but dear; but dear.

Thou hast fought hard enough. Thou drawest breath
Even now, long past thy portioned hour of death,
By murdering her ... and blamest my faint heart,
Coward, who hast let a woman play thy part
And die to save her pretty soldier! Aye,
A good plan, surely! Thou needst never die;
Thou canst find alway somewhere some fond wife
To die for thee. But, prithee, make not strife
With other friends, who will not save thee so.
Be silent, loving thine own life, and know
All men love theirs!... Taunt others, and thou too
Shalt hear much that is bitter, and is true.

LEADER.

Too much of wrath before, too much hath run
After. Old man, cease to revile thy son.

ADMETUS.

Speak on. I have spoken.... If my truth of tongue
Gives pain to thee, why didst thou do me wrong?

PHERES.

Wrong? To have died for thee were far more wrong.

ADMETUS.

How can an old life weigh against a young?

PHERES.

Man hath but one, not two lives, to his use.

ADMETUS.

Oh, live on; live, and grow more old than Zeus!



PHERES.

Because none wrongs thee, thou must curse thy sire?

ADMETUS.

I blest him. Is not life his one desire?

PHERES.

This dead, methinks, is lying in *thy* place.

ADMETUS.

A proof, old traitor, of thy cowardliness!

PHERES.

Died she through me?... That thou wilt hardly say.

ADMETUS (*almost breaking down*).

O God!

Mayst thou but feel the need of me some day!

PHERES.

Go forward; woo more wives that more may die.

ADMETUS.

As thou wouldst not! Thine is the infamy.

PHERES.

This light of heaven is sweet, and sweet again.

ADMETUS.

Thy heart is foul. A thing unmeet for men.

PHERES.

Thou laugh'st not yet across the old man's tomb.

ADMETUS.

Dishonoured thou shalt die when death shall come.

PHERES.

Once dead, I shall not care what tales are told.

ADMETUS.

Great Gods, so lost to honour and so old!

PHERES.

She was not lost to honour: she was blind.

ADMETUS.

Go! Leave me with my dead.... Out from my mind!



PHERES.

I go. Bury the woman thou hast slain....
Her kinsmen yet may come to thee with plain
Question. Acastus hath small place in good
Men, if he care not for his sister's blood.

[PHERES *goes off, with his Attendants.* ADMETUS *calls after him as he goes.*]

ADMETUS.

Begone, begone, thou and thy bitter mate!
Be old and childless—ye have earned your fate—
While your son lives! For never shall ye be
From henceforth under the same roof with me....
Must I send heralds and a trumpet's call
To abjure thy blood? Fear not, I will send them all....

Page 22

[PHERES *is now out of sight*; ADMETUS *drops his defiance and seems like a broken man.*]

But we—our sorrow is upon us; come
With me, and let us bear her to the tomb.

CHORUS.

Ah me!

Farewell, unfalteringly brave!
Farewell, thou generous heart and true!
May Pluto give thee welcome due,
And Hermes love thee in the grave.
Whate'er of blessed life there be
For high souls to the darkness flown,
Be thine for ever, and a throne
Beside the crowned Persephone.

[*The funeral procession has formed and moves slowly out, followed by ADMETUS and the CHORUS. The stage is left empty, till a side door of the Castle opens and there comes out a SERVANT, angry and almost in tears.*]

SERVANT.

Full many a stranger and from many a land
Hath lodged in this old castle, and my hand
Served them; but never has there passed this way
A scurvier ruffian than our guest to-day.
He saw my master's grief, but all the more
In he must come, and shoulders through the door.
And after, think you he would mannerly
Take what was set before him? No, not he!
If, on this day of trouble, we left out
Some small thing, he must have it with a shout.
Up, in both hands, our vat of ivy-wood
He raised, and drank the dark grape's burning blood,
Strong and untempered, till the fire was red
Within him; then put myrtle round his head
And roared some noisy song. So had we there
Discordant music. He, without a care
For all the affliction of Admetus' halls,
Sang on; and, listening, one could hear the thralls
In the long gallery weeping for the dead.
We let him see no tears. Our master made
That order, that the stranger must not know.
So here I wait in her own house, and do



Service to some black thief, some man of prey;
And she has gone, has gone for ever away.
I never followed her, nor lifted high
My hand to bless her; never said good-bye....
I loved her like my mother. So did all
The slaves. She never let his anger fall
Too hard. She saved us alway.... And this wild beast
Comes in our sorrow when we need him least!

[During the last few lines HERACLES has entered, unperceived by the SERVANT. He has evidently bathed and changed his garments and drunk his fill, and is now revelling, a garland of flowers on his head. He frightens the SERVANT a little from time to time during the following speech.]

HERACLES.

Friend, why so solemn and so cranky-eyed?
'Tis not a henchman's office, to show pride
To his betters. He should smile and make good cheer.
There comes a guest, thy lord's old comrade, here;
And thou art all knitted eyebrows, scowls and head
Bent, because somebody, forsooth, is dead!
Come close! I mean to make thee wiser.

[The SERVANT reluctantly comes close.]



Page 23

So.

Dost comprehend things mortal, how they grow?...

(*To himself*) I suppose not. How could he?...

Look this way!

Death is a debt all mortal men must pay;

Aye, there is no man living who can say

If life will last him yet a single day.

On, to the dark, drives Fortune; and no force

Can wrest her secret nor put back her course....

I have told thee now. I have taught thee. After this

Eat, drink, make thyself merry. Count the bliss Of the one passing hour thine own; the rest

Is Fortune's. And give honour chiefliest

To our lady Cypris, giver of all joys

To man. 'Tis a sweet goddess. Otherwise,

Let all these questions sleep and just obey

My counsel.... Thou believest all I say?

I hope so.... Let this stupid grieving be;

Rise up above thy troubles, and with me

Drink in a cloud of blossoms. By my soul,

I vow the sweet splash-music of the bowl

Will break thy glumness, loose thee from the frown

Within. Let mortal man keep to his own

Mortality, and not expect too much.

To all your solemn dogs and other such

Scowlers—I tell thee truth, no more nor less—

Life is not life, but just unhappiness.

[*He offers the wine-bowl to the SERVANT, who avoids it.*]

SERVANT.

We know all this. But now our fortunes be

Not such as ask for mirth or revelry.

HERACLES.

A woman dead, of no one's kin; why grieve

So much? Thy master and thy mistress live.

SERVANT.

Live? Man, hast thou heard nothing of our woe?

HERACLES.

Yes, thy lord told me all I need to know.



SERVANT.

He is too kind to his guests, more kind than wise.

HERACLES.

Must I go starved because some stranger dies?

SERVANT.

Some stranger?—Yes, a stranger verily!

HERACLES (*his manner beginning to change*).

Is this some real grief he hath hid from me?

SERVANT.

Go, drink, man! Leave to us our master's woes.

HERACLES.

It sounds not like a stranger. Yet, God knows...

SERVANT.

How should thy revelling hurt, if that were all?

HERACLES.

Hath mine own friend so wronged me in his hall?

SERVANT.

Thou camest at an hour when none was free
To accept thee. We were mourning. Thou canst see
Our hair, black robes...

HERACLES (*suddenly, in a voice of thunder*).

Who is it that is dead?

SERVANT.

Alcestis, the King's wife.

HERACLES (*overcome*).

What hast thou said?

Alcestis?... And ye feasted me withal!

SERVANT.

He held it shame to turn thee from his hall.

HERACLES.

Shame! And when such a wondrous wife was gone!



Page 24

SERVANT (*breaking into tears*).
Oh, all is gone, all lost, not she alone!

HERACLES.
I knew, I felt it, when I saw his tears,
And face, and shorn hair. But he won mine ears
With talk of the strange woman and her rite
Of burial. So in mine own heart's despite
I crossed his threshold and sat drinking—he
And I old friends!—in his calamity.
Drank, and sang songs, and revelled, my head hot
With wine and flowers!... And thou to tell me not,
When all the house lay filled with sorrow, thou!
(*A pause; then suddenly*)
Where lies the tomb?—Where shall I find her now?

SERVANT (*frightened*).
Close by the straight Larissa road. The tall
White marble showeth from the castle wall.

HERACLES.
O heart, O hand, great doings have ye done
Of old: up now, and show them what a son
Took life that hour, when she of Tiryons' sod,
Electryon's daughter, mingled with her God!
I needs must save this woman from the shore
Of death and set her in her house once more,
Repaying Admetus' love.... This Death, this black
And winged Lord of corpses, I will track
Home. I shall surely find him by the grave
A-hungred, lapping the hot blood they gave
In sacrifice. An ambush: then, one spring,
One grip! These arms shall be a brazen ring,
With no escape, no rest, howe'er he whine
And curse his mauled ribs, till the Queen is mine!
Or if he escape me, if he come not there
To seek the blood of offering, I will fare
Down to the Houses without Light, and bring
To Her we name not and her nameless King
Strong prayers, until they yield to me and send
Alcestis home, to life and to my friend:
Who gave me shelter, drove me not away
In his great grief, but hid his evil day
Like a brave man, because he loved me well.



Is one in all this land more hospitable,
One in all Greece? I swear no man shall say
He hath cast his love upon a churl away!

[He goes forth, just as he is, in the direction of the grave. The SERVANT watches a moment and goes back into the hall.]

[The stage is empty; then ADMETUS and the CHORUS return.]

ADMETUS.

Alas!

Bitter the homeward way,
Bitter to seek
A widowed house; ah me,
Where should I fly or stay,
Be dumb or speak?
Would I could cease to be!

Despair, despair!
My mother bore me under an evil star.
I envy them that are perished; my heart is there.
It dwells in the Sunless Houses, afar, afar.

I take no joy in looking upon the light;
No joy in the feel of the earth beneath my tread.
The Slayer hath taken his hostage; the Lord of the Dead
Holdeth me sworn to taste no more delight.

[He throws himself on the ground in despair.]

CHORUS. *[Each member of the CHORUS speaks his line severally, as he passes ADMETUS, who is heard sobbing at the end of each line.]*

Page 25

—Advance, advance;
Till the house shall give thee cover.
—Thou hast borne heavy things
And meet for lamentation.
—Thou hast passed, hast passed,
Thro' the deepest of the River.
—Yet no help comes
To the sad and silent nation.
—And the face of thy beloved, it shall meet thee never, never!

ADMETUS.

Ye wrench my wounds asunder. Where
Is grief like mine, whose wife is dead?
My wife, whom would I ne'er had wed,
Nor loved, nor held my house with her....

Blessed are they who dare to dwell
Unloved of woman! 'Tis but one
Heart that they bleed with, and alone
Can bear their one life's burden well.

No young shall wither at their side,
No bridal room be swept by death....
Aye, better man should draw his breath
For ever without child or bride.

CHORUS (*as before*).

—'Tis Fate, 'tis Fate:
She is strong and none shall break her.
—No end, no end,
Wilt thou lay to lamentations?
—Endure and be still:
Thy lamenting will not wake her.
—There be many before thee,
Who have suffered and had patience.
—Though the face of Sorrow changeth, yet her hand is on all nations.

ADMETUS.

The garb of tears, the mourner's cry:
Then the long ache when tears are past!...
Oh, why didst hinder me to cast
This body to the dust and die
With her, the faithful and the brave?
Then not one lonely soul had fled,



But two great lovers, proudly dead,
Through the deep waters of the grave.

LEADER.

A friend I knew,
In whose house died a son,
Worthy of bitter rue,
His only one.
His head sank, yet he bare
Stilly his weight of care,
Though grey was in his hair
And life nigh done.

ADMETUS.

Ye shapes that front me, wall and gate,
How shall I enter in and dwell
Among ye, with all Fortune's spell
Dischanted? Aye, the change is great.

That day I strode with bridal song
Through lifted brands of Pelian pine;
A hand beloved lay in mine;
And loud behind a revelling throng

Exalted me and her, the dead.
They called us young, high-hearted; told
How princes were our sires of old,
And how we loved and we must wed....

For those high songs, lo, men that moan,
And raiment black where once was white;
Who guide me homeward in the night,
On that waste bed to lie alone.

SECOND ELDER.

It breaks, like strife,
Thy long peace, where no pain
Had entered; yet is life,
Sweet life, not slain.
A wife dead; a dear chair
Empty: is that so rare?
Men live without despair
Whose loves are ta'en.



Page 26

ADMETUS (*erect and facing them*).

Behold, I count my wife's fate happier,
Though all gainsay me, than mine own. To her
Comes no more pain for ever; she hath rest
And peace from all toil, and her name is blest.
But I am one who hath no right to stay
Alive on earth; one that hath lost his way
In fate, and strays in dreams of life long past....
Friends, I have learned my lesson at the last.

I have my life. Here stands my house. But now
How dare I enter in? Or, entered, how
Go forth again? Go forth, when none is there
To give me a parting word, and I to her?...

Where shall I turn for refuge? There within,
The desert that remains where she hath been
Will drive me forth, the bed, the empty seat
She sat in; nay, the floor beneath my feet
Unswept, the children crying at my knee
For mother; and the very thralls will be
In sobs for the dear mistress that is lost.

That is my home! If I go forth, a host
Of feasts and bridal dances, gatherings gay
Of women, will be there to fright me away
To loneliness. Mine eyes will never bear
The sight. They were her friends; they played with her.

And always, always, men who hate my name
Will murmur: "This is he who lives in shame
Because he dared not die! He gave instead
The woman whom he loved, and so is fled
From death. He counts himself a man withal!
And seeing his parents died not at his call
He hates them, when himself he dared not die!"

Such mocking beside all my pain shall I
Endure.... What profit was it to live on,
Friend, with my grief kept and mine honour gone?

CHORUS.

I have sojourned in the Muse's land,
Have wandered with the wandering star,
Seeking for strength, and in my hand
Held all philosophies that are;
Yet nothing could I hear nor see
Stronger than That Which Needs Must Be.



No Orphic rune, no Thracian scroll,
Hath magic to avert the morrow;
No healing all those medicines brave
Apollo to the Asclepiad gave;
Pale herbs of comfort in the bowl
Of man's wide sorrow.
She hath no temple, she alone,
Nor image where a man may kneel;
No blood upon her altar-stone
Crying shall make her hear nor feel.
I know thy greatness; come not great
Beyond my dreams, O Power of Fate!
Aye, Zeus himself shall not uncloset
His purpose save by thy discerning.
The chain of iron, the Scythian sword,
It yields and shivers at thy word;
Thy heart is as the rock, and knows
No ruth, nor turning.

[*They turn to ADMETUS.*]

Her hand hath caught thee; yea, the keeping
Of iron fingers grips thee round.
Be still. Be still. Thy noise of weeping
Shall raise no lost one from the ground.
Nay, even the Sons of God are parted
At last from joy, and pine in death....
Oh, dear on earth when all did love her,
Oh, dearer lost beyond recover:
Of women all the bravest-hearted
Hath pressed thy lips and breathed thy breath.



Page 27

Let not the earth that lies upon her
Be deemed a grave-mound of the dead.
Let honour, as the Gods have honour,
Be hers, till men shall bow the head,
And strangers, climbing from the city
Her slanting path, shall muse and say:
“This woman died to save her lover,
And liveth blest, the stars above her:
Hail, Holy One, and grant thy pity!”
So pass the wondering words away.

LEADER.

But see, it is Alcmena’s son once more,
My lord King, cometh striding to thy door.

[Enter HERACLES; his dress is as in the last scene, but shows signs of a struggle. Behind come two Attendants, guiding between them a veiled Woman, who seems like one asleep or unconscious. The Woman remains in the background while HERACLES comes forward.]

HERACLES.

Thou art my friend, Admetus; therefore bold
And plain I tell my story, and withhold
No secret hurt.—Was I not worthy, friend,
To stand beside thee; yea, and to the end
Be proven in sorrow if I was true to thee?
And thou didst tell me not a word, while she
Lay dead within; but bid me feast, as though
Naught but the draping of some stranger’s woe
Was on thee. So I garlanded my brow
And poured the gods drink-offering, and but now
Filled thy death-stricken house with wine and song.
Thou hast done me wrong, my brother; a great wrong
Thou hast done me. But I will not add more pain
In thine affliction.

Why I am here again,
Returning, thou must hear. I pray thee, take
And keep yon woman for me till I make
My homeward way from Thrace, when I have ta’en
Those four steeds and their bloody master slain.
And if—which heaven avert!—I ne’er should see
Hellas again, I leave her here, to be
An handmaid in thy house. No labour small
Was it that brought her to my hand at all.



I fell upon a contest certain Kings
Had set for all mankind, sore buffetings
And meet for strong men, where I staked my life
And won this woman. For the easier strife
Black steeds were prizes; herds of kine were cast
For heavier issues, fists and wrestling; last,
This woman.... Lest my work should all seem done
For naught, I needs must keep what I have won;
So prithee take her in. No theft, but true
Toil, won her.... Some day thou mayst thank me, too.

ADMETUS.

'Twas in no scorn, no bitterness to thee,
I hid my wife's death and my misery.
Methought it was but added pain on pain
If thou shouldst leave me, and roam forth again
Seeking another's roof. And, for mine own
Sorrow, I was content to weep alone.
But, for this damsel, if it may be so,
I pray thee, Lord, let some man, not in woe
Like mine, take her. Thou hast in Thessaly
Abundant friends.... 'Twould wake sad thoughts in me.
How could I have this damsel in my sight
And keep mine eyes dry? Prince, why wilt thou



Page 28

smite

The smitten? Griefs enough are on my head.

Where in my castle could so young a maid
Be lodged—her veil and raiment show her young:
Here, in the men's hall? I should fear some wrong.
'Tis not so easy, Prince, to keep controlled
My young men. And thy charge I fain would hold
Sacred.—If not, wouldst have me keep her in
The women's chambers ... where my dead hath been?
How could I lay this woman where my bride
Once lay? It were dishonour double-dyed.
These streets would curse the man who so betrayed
The wife who saved him for some younger maid;
The dead herself ... I needs must worship her
And keep her will.

[During the last few lines ADMETUS has been looking at the veiled Woman and, though he does not consciously recognize her, feels a strange emotion overmastering him. He draws back.]

Aye. I must walk with care....
O woman, whosoe'er thou art, thou hast
The shape of my Alcestis; thou art cast
In mould like hers.... Oh, take her from mine eyes!
In God's name!

[HERACLES signs to the Attendants to take ALCESTIS away again. She stays veiled and unnoticing in the background.]

I was fallen, and in this wise
Thou wilt make me deeper fall.... Meseems, meseems,
There in her face the loved one of my dreams
Looked forth.—My heart is made a turbid thing,
Craving I know not what, and my tears spring
Unbidden.—Grief I knew 'twould be; but how
Fiery a grief I never knew till now.

LEADER.

Thy fate I praise not. Yet, what gift soe'er
God giveth, man must steel himself and bear.



HERACLES (*drawing ADMETUS on*).

Would God, I had the power, 'mid all this might
Of arm, to break the dungeons of the night,
And free thy wife, and make thee glad again!

ADMETUS.

Where is such power? I know thy heart were fain;
But so 'tis writ. The dead shall never rise.

HERACLES.

Chafe not the curb, then: suffer and be wise.

ADMETUS.

Easier to give such counsel than to keep.

HERACLES.

Who will be happier, shouldst thou always weep?

ADMETUS.

Why, none. Yet some blind longing draws me on...

HERACLES.

'Tis natural. Thou didst love her that is gone.

ADMETUS.

'Tis that hath wrecked, oh more than wrecked, my life.

HERACLES.

'Tis certain: thou hast lost a faithful wife.

ADMETUS.

Till life itself is dead and wearies me.

HERACLES.

Thy pain is yet young. Time will soften thee,

[*The veiled Woman begins dimly, as though in a dream, to hear the words spoken.*]

ADMETUS.

Time? Yes, if time be death.

HERACLES.

Nay, wait; and some
Woman, some new desire of love, will come.

ADMETUS (*indignantly*).

Peace!

How canst thou? Shame upon thee!



Page 29

HERACLES.

Thou wilt stay
Unwed for ever, lonely night and day?

ADMETUS.

No other bride in these void arms shall lie.

HERACLES.

What profit will thy dead wife gain thereby?

ADMETUS.

Honour; which finds her wheresoe'er she lies.

HERACLES.

Most honourable in thee: but scarcely wise!

ADMETUS.

God curse me, if I betray her in her tomb!

HERACLES.

So be it!...
And this good damsel, thou wilt take her home?

ADMETUS.

No, in the name of Zeus, thy father! No!

HERACLES.

I swear, 'tis not well to reject her so.

ADMETUS.

'Twould tear my heart to accept her.

HERACLES.

Grant me, friend,
This one boon! It may help thee in the end.

ADMETUS.

Woe's me!
Would God thou hadst never won those victories!

HERACLES.

Thou sharest both the victory and the prize.

ADMETUS.

Thou art generous.... But now let her go.



HERACLES.

 Reach forth thine hand
And touch this comer from a distant land.

ADMETUS (*holding out his hand without looking*).
Like Perseus when he touched the Gorgon, there!

HERACLES.

Thou hast touched her?

ADMETUS (*at last taking her hand*).
 Touched her?... Yes.

HERACLES (*a hand on the shoulder of each*).
 Then cling to her;
And say if thou hast found a guest of grace
In God's son, Heracles! Look in her face;
Look; is she like...?



Page 30

[ADMETUS *looks and stands amazed.*]

Go, and forget in bliss

Thy sorrow!

ADMETUS.

O ye Gods! What meaneth this?

A marvel beyond dreams! The face ... 'tis she;

Mine, verily mine! Or doth God mock at me

And blast my vision with some mad surmise?

HERACLES.

Not so. This is thy wife before thine eyes.

ADMETUS (*who has recoiled in his amazement*).

Beware! The dead have phantoms that they send...

HERACLES.

Nay; no ghost-raiser hast thou made thy friend.

ADMETUS.

My wife ... she whom I buried?

HERACLES.

I deceive

Thee not; nor wonder thou canst scarce believe.

ADMETUS.

And dare I touch her, greet her, as mine own

Wife living?

HERACLES.

Greet her. Thy desire is won.

ADMETUS (*approaching with awe*),

Beloved eyes; beloved form; O thou

Gone beyond hope, I have thee, I hold thee now?

HERACLES.

Thou hast her: may no god begrudge your joy.

ADMETUS (*turning to HERACLES*).

O lordly conqueror, Child of Zeus on high,

Be blessed! And may He, thy sire above,

Save thee, as thou alone hast saved my love!



[*He kneels to HERACLES, who raises him.*]

But how ... how didst thou win her to the light?

HERACLES.

I fought for life with Him I needs must fight.

ADMETUS.

With Death thou hast fought! But where?

HERACLES.

 Among his dead
I lay, and sprang and gripped him as he fled.

ADMETUS (*in an awed whisper, looking towards ALCESTIS*).
Why standeth she so still? No sound, no word!

HERACLES.

She hath dwelt with Death. Her voice may not be heard
Ere to the Lords of Them Below she pay
Due cleansing, and awake on the third day.
(*To the Attendants*) So; guide her home.

[*They lead ALCESTIS to the doorway.*]

And thou, King, for the rest
Of time, be true; be righteous to thy guest,
As he would have thee be. But now farewell!
My task yet lies before me, and the spell
That binds me to my master; forth I fare.

ADMETUS.

Stay with us this one day! Stay but to share
The feast upon our hearth!

HERACLES.

 The feasting day
Shall surely come; now I must needs away.

[*HERACLES departs.*]

ADMETUS.

Farewell! All victory attend thy name
And safe home-coming!
 Lo, I make proclaim
To the Four Nations and all Thessaly;
A wondrous happiness hath come to be:
Therefore pray, dance, give offerings and make full

Your altars with the life-blood of the Bull!
For me ... my heart is changed; my life shall mend
Henceforth. For surely Fortune is a friend.



Page 31

[*He goes with ALCESTIS into the house.*]

CHORUS.

There be many shapes of mystery;
And many things God brings to be,
Past hope or fear.
And the end men looked for cometh not,
And a path is there where no man thought.
So hath it fallen here.

NOTES

P. 3, Prologue. Asclepios (Latin Aesculapius), son of Apollo, the hero-physician, by his miraculous skill healed the dead. This transgressed the divine law, so Zeus slew him. (The particular dead man raised by him was Hippolytus, who came to life in Italy under the name of Virbius, and was worshipped with Artemis at Aricia.) Apollo in revenge, not presuming to attack Zeus himself, killed the Cyclopes, and was punished by being exiled from heaven and made servant to a mortal. There are several such stories of gods made servants to human beings.

P. 3, l. 12, Beguiling.]—See Preface. In the original story he made them drunk with wine. (Aesch. *Eumenides*, 728.) As the allusion would doubtless be clear to the Greek audience, I have added a mention of wine which is not in the Greek. Libations to the Elder Gods, such as the Fates and Eumenides, had to be “wineless.” Historically this probably means that the worship dates from a time before wine was used in Greece.

P. 4, l. 22, The stain of death must not come nigh My radiance.]—Compare Artemis in the last scene of the *Hippolytus*. The presence of a dead body would be a pollution to Apollo, though that of Thanatos (Death) himself seems not to be so. It is rather Thanatos who is dazzled and blinded by Apollo, like an owl or bat in the sunlight.

P. 5, l. 43, Rob me of my second prey.]—“You first cheated me of Admetus, and now you cheat me of his substitute.”

P. 6, l. 59, The rich would buy, etc.]—Here and throughout this difficult little dialogue I follow the readings of my own text in the *Bibliotheca Oxoniensis*.

P. 7, l. 74, To lay upon her hair my sword.]—As the sacrificing priest cut off a lock of hair from the victim’s head before the actual sacrifice.

P. 8, l. 77, Chorus.]—The Chorus consists of citizens, probably Elders, of the city of Pherae. Dr. Verrall has rightly pointed out that there is some general dissatisfaction in the town at Admetus’s behaviour (l. 210 ff.). These citizens come to mourn with Admetus out of old friendship, though they do not altogether defend him.



The Chorus is very drastically broken up into so many separate persons conversing with one another; the treatment in the *Rhesus* is similar but even bolder. See *Rhesus*, pp. 28-31, 37-42. Cf. also the entrance-choruses of the *Trojan Women* (pp. 19-23) and the *Medea* (pp. 10-13); and ll. 872 ff., 889 ff., pp. 50, 51, below.

Instead of assigning the various lines definitely to First, Second, Third Citizen, and so on, I have put a “paragraphus” (—), the ancient Greek sign for indicating a new speaker.

Page 32

P. 8, l. 82, Pelias' daughter.]—*i.e.* Alcestis.

P. 8, l. 92, Paian.]—The Healer. The word survives chiefly as a cry for help and as an epithet or title of Apollo or Asclepius. "Paian," Latin Paeon, is also a cry of victory; but the relation of the two meanings is not quite made out. (Pronounce rather like "Pah-yan.") Cf. l. 220.

P. 9, l. 112, To wander o'er leagues of land.]—You could sometimes save a sick person by appealing to an oracle, such as that of Apollo in Lycia or of Zeus Ammon in the Libyan desert; but now no sacrifice will help. Only Asclepius, were he still on earth, might have helped us. (See on the Prologue.)

P. 12, l. 150, 'Fore God she dies high-hearted.]—What impresses the Elder is the calm and deliberate way in which Alcestis faces these preparations.

P. 12, l. 162, Before the Hearth-Fire.]—Hestia, the hearth-fire, was a goddess, the Latin Vesta, and is addressed as "Mother." It is characteristic in Alcestis to think chiefly about happy marriages for the children.

P. 12, l. 182, Happier perhaps, more true she cannot be.]—A famous line and open to parody. Cf. Aristophanes, *Knights*, 1251 ("Another wear this crown instead of me, Happier perhaps; worse thief he cannot be"). And see on l. 367 below.

P. 15, l. 228, Hearts have bled.]—People have committed suicide for less than this.

P. 16, l. 244, O Sun.]—Alcestis has come out to see the Sun and Sky for the last time and say good-bye to them. It is a rite or practice often mentioned in Greek poetry. Her beautiful wandering lines about Charon and his boat are the more natural because she is not dying from any disease but is being mysteriously drawn away by the Powers of Death.

P. 16, l. 252, A boat, two-oared.]—She sees Charon, the boatman who ferried the souls of the dead across the river Styx.

P. 17, l. 259, Drawing, drawing.]—The creature whom she sees drawing her to "the palaces of the dead" is certainly not Charon, who had no wings, but was like an old boatman in a peasant's cap and sleeveless tunic; nor can he be Hades, the throned King to whose presence she must eventually go. Apparently, therefore, he must be Thanatos, whom we have just seen on the stage. He was evidently supposed to be invisible to ordinary human eyes.

P. 18, l. 280, Alcestis's speech.]—Great simplicity and sincerity are the keynotes of this fine speech. Alcestis does not make light of her sacrifice: she enjoyed her life and values it; she wishes one of the old people had died instead; she is very earnest that Admetus shall not marry again, chiefly for the children's sake, but possibly also from



some little shadow of jealousy. A modern dramatist would express all this, if at all, by a scene or a series of scenes of conversation; Euripides always uses the long self-revealing speech. Observe how little romantic love there is in *Alcestis*, though *Admetus* is full of it. See Preface, pp. xiii, xiv.

Page 33

Pp. 19, 20, l. 328 ff., Admetus's speech.]—If the last speech made us know Alcestis, this makes us know Admetus fully as well. At one time the beauty and passion of it almost make us forget its ultimate hollowness; at another this hollowness almost makes us lose patience with its beautiful language. In this state of balance the touch of satire in l. 338 f. ("My mother I will know no more," etc.), and the fact that he speaks immediately after the complete sincerity of Alcestis, conspire to weigh down the scale against Admetus. There can be no doubt that he means, and means passionately, all that he says. Only he could not quite manage to die when it was not strictly necessary.

P. 20, l. 355, If Orpheus' voice were mine.]—The bard and prophet, Orpheus, went down to the dead to win back his wife, Eurydice. Hades and Persephone, spell-bound by his music, granted his prayer that Eurydice should return to the light, on condition that he should go before her, harping, and should never look back to see if she was following. Just at the end of the journey he looked back, and she vanished. The story is told with overpowering beauty in Vergil's fourth Georgic.

P. 21, l. 367, Oh, not in death from thee Divided.]—Parodied in Aristophanes' *Archarnians* 894, where it is addressed to an eel, and the second line ends "in a beet-root fricassee." See on l. 182.

P. 23, l. 393 ff., The Little Boy's speech.]—Classical Greek sculpture and vase-painting tended to represent children not like children but like diminutive men; and something of the sort is true of Greek tragedy. The stately tragic convention has in the main to be maintained; the child must speak a language suited for heroes, or at least for high poetry. The quality of childishness has to be indicated by a word or so of child-language delicately admitted amid the stateliness. Here we have [Greek: maia], something like "mummy," at the beginning, and [Greek: neossos], "chicken" or "little bird," at the end. Otherwise most of the language is in the regular tragic diction, and some of it doubtless seems to us unsuitable for a child. If Milton had had to make a child speak in *Paradise Lost*, what sort of diction would he have given it?

The success or ill-success of such an attempt as this to combine the two styles, the heroic and the childlike, depends on questions of linguistic tact, and can hardly be judged with any confidence by foreigners. But I think we can see Euripides here, as in other places, reaching out at an effect which was really beyond the resources of his art, and attaining a result which, though clearly imperfect, is strangely moving. He gets great effects from the use of children in several tragedies, though he seldom lets them speak. They speak in the *Medea*, the *Andromache*, and *Suppliants*, and are mute figures in the *Trojan Women*, *Hecuba*, *Heracles*, and *Iphigenia in Aulis*. We may notice that where his children do speak, they speak only in lyrics, never in ordinary dialogue. This is very significant, and clearly right.

Page 34

The breaking-down of the child seems to string Admetus to self-control again.

P. 25, l. 428, Ye chariot-lords.]—The plain of Thessaly was famous for its cavalry.

P. 25, l. 436 ff., Chorus.]—The “King black-browed” is, of course, Hades; the “grey hand at the helm and oar,” Charon; the “Tears that Well,” the more that spreads out from Acheron, the River of *Ache* or Sorrows.

P. 25, l. 445 ff. Alcestis shall be celebrated—and no doubt worshipped— at certain full-moon feasts in Athens and Sparta, especially at the Carneia, a great Spartan festival held at the full moon in the month Carneios (August-September). Who the ancient hero Carnos or Carneios was is not very clearly stated by the tradition; but at any rate he was killed, and the feast was meant to placate and perhaps to revive him. Resurrection is apt to be a feature of both moon-goddesses and vegetation spirits.

P. 27, l. 476, Entrance of Heracles.]—Generally, in the tragic convention, each character that enters either announces himself or is announced by some one on the stage; but the figure of Heracles with his club and lion-skin was so well known that his identity could be taken for granted. The Leader at once addresses him by name.

P. 27, l. 481, The Argive King.]—It was the doom of Heracles, from before his birth, to be the servant of a worser man. His master proved to be Eurystheus, King of Tiryns or Argos, who was his kinsman, and older by a day. See *Iliad* T 95 ff. Note the heroic quality of Heracles’s answer in l. 491. It does not occur to him to think of reward for himself.

P. 27, l. 483, Diomedes of Thrace.]—This man, distinguished in legend from the Diomedes of the *Iliad*, was a savage king who threw wayfarers to his man-eating horses. Such horses are not mere myths; horses have often been trained to fight with their teeth, like carnivora, for war purposes. Diomedes was a son of Ares, the War-god or Slayer, as were the other wild tyrants mentioned just below, Lycaon, the Wolf-hero, and Cynus, the Swan.

P. 30, l. 511, Right welcome were she: *i.e.* Joy.]—“Joy would be a strange visitor to me, but I know you mean kindly.”

P. 30, l. 518 ff., Not thy wife? ’Tis not Alcestis?])—The rather elaborate misleading of Heracles, without any direct lie, depends partly on the fact that the Greek word [Greek: *gynae*]; means both “woman” and “wife.”—The woman, not of kin with Admetus but much loved in the house, who has lived there since her father’s death left her an orphan, is of course Alcestis, but Heracles, misled by Admetus’s first answers, supposes it is some dependant to whom the King happens to be attached. He naturally proposes to go away, but, with much reluctance, allows himself to be over-persuaded by Admetus. He had other friends in Thessaly, but the next castle would probably be

several miles off. The guest-chambers of the castle are apparently in a separate building with a connecting passage.

Page 35

As to Admetus's motive, we must remember that the entertaining of Heracles is a datum of the story in its simplest form. See Preface, pp. xiv, xv. In Euripides, Admetus is perhaps actuated by a mixture of motives, real kindness, pride in his ancestral hospitality, and a little vanity. He likes having the great Son of Zeus for a friend, and he has never yet turned any one from his doors.

Euripides passes no distinct judgment on this act of Admetus. The Leader in the dialogue blames him ("Art thou mad?") and so does Heracles hereafter, p. 56. But the Chorus glorifies his deed in a very delightful lyric. Perhaps this indicates the judgment we are meant to pass upon it. On the plane of common sense it was doubtless all wrong, but on that of imaginative poetry it was magnificent.

P. 35, ll. 569-605, Chorus.]—Apollo, worshipped as a shepherd god and a singer, harper, piper, etc. ("song-changer"), had been himself a stranger in this "House that loved the stranger": hence its great reward. Othrys is the end of the mountain range to the south of Pherae; Lake Boibeis was just across the narrow end of the plain to the north-east, beyond it came Mt. Pelion and the steep harbourless coast. Up to the north-west the plain of Thessaly stretched far away towards the Molossian mountains. The wild beasts gathered round Apollo as they did round Orpheus ("There where Orpheus harped of old, And the trees awoke and knew him, And the wild things gathered to him, As he piped amid the broken Glens his music manifold."—*Bacchae*, p. 35).

P. 37, l. 614, Scene with Pheres.]—Pheres is in tradition the "eponymous hero" of Pherae, *i.e.* the mythical person who is supposed to have given his name to the town. It is only in this play that he has any particular character. The scene gives the reader a shock, but is a brilliant piece of satirical comedy, with a good deal of pathos in it, too. The line (691) [Greek: *chaireis horon phos, patera d' ou chairein dokeis*]; ("Thou lovest the light, thinkest thou thy father loves it not?") seems to me one of the most characteristic in Euripides. It has a peculiar mordant beauty in its absolutely simple language, and one cannot measure the intensity of feeling that may be behind it. Pheres shows great power of fight, yet one feels his age and physical weakness. See Preface, p. xvi.

P. 40, l. 713 ff. The quick thrust and parry are sometimes hard to follow in reading, though in acting the sense would be plain enough. Admetus cries angrily, "Oh, live a longer life than Zeus!" "Is that a curse?" says Pheres; "are you cursing because nobody does you any harm?" (*i.e.* since you clearly have nothing else to curse for). Admetus: "On the contrary I blessed you; I knew you were greedy of life." Pheres: "*I greedy? It is you, I believe, that Alcestis is dying for.*"

P. 42, l. 732. Acastus was Alcestis's brother, son of Pelias.

Page 36

P. 43, l. 747. It is rare in Greek tragedy for the Chorus to leave the stage altogether in the middle of a play. But they do so, for example, in the *Ajax* of Sophocles. Ajax is lost, and the Sailors who form the Chorus go out to look for him; when they are gone the scene is supposed to shift and Ajax enters alone, arranging his own death. This very effective scene of the revelling Heracles is to be explained, I think, by the Satyr-play tradition. See Preface.

P. 45, ll. 782-785. There are four lines rhyming in the Greek here; an odd and slightly drunken effect.

P. 46, l. 805 ff., A woman dead, of no one's kin: why grieve so much?— Heracles is somewhat “shameless,” as a Greek would say; he had much more delicacy when he was sober.

P. 48, l. 837 ff. A fine speech, leaving one in doubt whether it is the outburst of a real hero or the vapouring of a half-drunken man. Just the effect intended. Electryon was a chieftain of Tiryns. His daughter, Alcmene, the Tirynthian *Kore* or Earth-maiden, was beloved of Zeus, or, as others put it, was chosen by Zeus to be the mother of the Deliverer of mankind whom he was resolved to beget. She was married to Amphitryon of Thebes.

P. 49, l. 860 ff. If Heracles set out straight to the grave and Admetus with the procession was returning from the grave, how was it they did not meet? The answer is that Attic drama seldom asked such questions.

Pp. 49-54, ll. 861-961. This Threnos, or lamentation scene, seems to our minds a little long. We must remember (1) that a Tragedy *is* a Threnos—a *Trauerspiel*—and, however much it develops in the direction of a mere entertainment, the Threnos-element is of primary importance. (2) This scene has two purposes to serve; first to illustrate the helpless loneliness of Admetus when he returns to his empty house, and secondly the way in which remorse works in his mind, till in ll. 935-961 he makes public confession that he has done wrong. For both purposes one needs the illusion of a long lapse of time.

P. 53, l. 945 ff., The floor unswept.]—Probably the floor really would be unswept in the house of a primitive Thessalian chieftain whose wife was dead and her place unfilled; but I doubt if the point would have been mentioned so straightforwardly in a real tragedy.

Pp. 54-55, l. 966 ff., That which Needs Must Be.]—Ananke or Necessity.— Orphic rune.]—The charms inscribed by Orpheus on certain tablets in Thrace. Orphic literature and worship had a strong magical element in them.



P. 55, l. 995 ff., A grave-mound of the dead.]—Every existing Greek tragedy has somewhere in it a taboo grave—a grave which is either worshipped, or specially avoided or somehow magical. We may conjecture from this passage that there was in the time of Euripides a sacred tomb near Pherae, which received worship and had the story told about it that she who lay there had died for her husband.

Page 37

Pp. 56-67, ll. 1008-end. This last scene must have been exceedingly difficult to compose, and some critics have thought it ineffective or worse. To me it seems brilliantly conceived and written, though of course it needs to be read with the imagination strongly at work. One must never forget the silent and veiled Woman on whom the whole scene centres. I have tried conjecturally to indicate the main lines of her acting, but, of course, others may read it differently.

To understand Heracles in this scene, one must first remember the traditional connexion of Satyrs (and therefore of satyric heroes) with the re-awakening of the dead Earth in spring and the return of human souls to their tribe. Dionysus was, of all the various Kouroi, the one most widely connected with resurrection ideas, and the Satyrs are his attendant daemons, who dance magic dances at the Return to Life of Semele or Persephone. And Heracles himself, in certain of his ritual aspects, has similar functions. See J.E. Harrison, *Themis*, pp. 422 f. and 365 ff., or my *Four Stages of Greek Religion*, pp. 46 f. This tradition explains, to start with, what Heracles—and this particular sort of revelling Heracles—has to do in a resurrection scene. Heracles bringing back the dead is a datum of the saga. There remain then the more purely dramatic questions about our poet's treatment of the datum.

Why, for instance, does Heracles mystify Admetus with the Veiled Woman? To break the news gently, or to retort his own mystification upon him? I think, the latter. Admetus had said that "a woman" was dead; Heracles says: "All right: here is 'a woman' whom I want you to look after."

Again, what are the feelings of Admetus himself? First, mere indignation and disgust at the utterly tactless proposal: then, I think, in 1061 ff. ("I must walk with care" ... end of speech), a strange discovery about himself which amazes and humiliates him. As he looks at the woman he finds himself feeling how exactly like Alcestis she is, and then yearning towards her, almost falling in love with her. A most beautiful and poignant touch. In modern language one would say that his subconscious nature feels Alcestis there and responds emotionally to her presence; his conscious nature, believing the woman to be a stranger, is horrified at his own apparent baseness and inconstancy.

P. 57, l. 1051, *Where in my castle, etc.*—The castle is divided into two main parts: a public *megaron* or great hall where the men live during the day and sleep at night, and a private region, ruled by the queen and centring in the *thamos* or royal bed-chamber. If the new woman were taken into this "harem," even if Admetus never spoke to her, the world outside would surmise the worst and consider him dishonoured.

P. 66, l. 1148, *Be righteous to thy guest, As he would have thee be.*—Does this mean "Go on being hospitable, as you have been," or "Learn after this not to take liberties with other guests"? It is hard to say.

Page 38

P. 66, l. 1152, The feasting day shall surely come; now I must needs away.]—A fine last word for Heracles. We have seen him feasting, but that makes a small part in his life. His main life is to perform labour upon labour in service to his king. Euripides occasionally liked this method of ending a play, not with a complete finish (Greek *catastrophe*), but with the opening of a door into some further vista of endurance or adventure. The *Trojan Women* ends by the women going out to the Greek ships to begin a life of slavery; the *Rhesus* with the doomed army of Trojans gathering bravely for an attack which we know will be disastrous. Here we have the story finished for Admetus and Alcestis, but no rest for Heracles. See the note at the end of my *Trojan Women*.

THE END