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DEATH, RESURRECTION, AND REALISM IN EURIPIDES' *ALCESTIS*[*]

'There is no well-known individual in all Greek mythology *except Alcestis* [original emphasis] who dies and is returned to human life without cosmic repercussions which are soon remedied' (John Heath). The ineluctability of death is not just a feature of Greek myth in general but is also one of the most prominent themes in Euripides' version of the story in his play *Alcestis* (438 BC). A further problem is that Greek tragedy is a basically realistic genre which is not hospitable to violations of the laws of nature. Euripides thus set himself a remarkable challenge in *Alcestis*, to present an event which violates a law of nature which is so unbreakable that it is on the whole observed throughout Greek mythology as well as being repeatedly affirmed in the play. This article will examine how he succeeds in doing so in a way which is dramatically convincing.

Keywords: Euripides, Alcestis, resurrection, Polyidus, death as a journey, realism, Hades, Thanatos, Heracles, Orpheus

Euripides' *Alcestis*, the earliest of his eighteen surviving plays, was first performed at the Festival of Dionysus in Athens in 438 BC. Three tragic playwrights competed each year, each of whom would normally put on three tragedies and a concluding satyr play. The tragedies could form a connected trilogy with a continuous plot, such as Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (458 BC), or could be entirely separate plays. Euripides' four plays in 438 BC were independent dramas on different subjects, with no connection between them.

The satyr play was a mythological burlesque featuring a chorus of satyrs, half-human and half-animal followers of the god Dionysus.

[*] I am indebted to *Greece and Rome*'s anonymous referee for drawing my attention to the new papyrus of Euripides' *Polyidus* before its publication.

Euripides' *Cyclops* is the only satyr play to have survived intact, although we also have substantial fragments of Sophocles' *Ichneutae* (*Trackers*). A notable feature of Euripides' production of 438 BC was that none of the four plays was a satyr play. *Alcestis* seems to have been the fourth play, and scholars have therefore discussed whether it might have satyric characteristics. The feature most often cited in this connection is the behaviour of Heracles when he is entertained by Admetus (described in lines 747–72), which has some similarity to his characteristic drunkenness and gluttony in satyr play and comedy. Modern scholars have coined the term 'pro-satyric' for a play which has satyric characteristics without being an actual satyr play, but *Alcestis* seems to be the only example.[1] It is not even certain that the tragedians invariably included a satyr play in each production. Furthermore, Greek tragedy itself can accommodate some variety of tone, and several extant tragedies have happy endings.

Alcestis is based on a folktale of which modern folklorists have found many examples from various countries.[2] A man is granted the opportunity to evade death if he can find someone to die on his behalf, often (although not in *Alcestis*) on his wedding day. No one else, including his parents, is willing to die for him, but his wife agrees to do so. We do not know in exactly what form this story was available to Euripides, but the tension between folktale material and sophisticated dramatic treatment is fundamental to interpretation of the play. There is some ancient evidence for the story being associated with Admetus, mythical king of Thessaly, but this is not one of those Greek myths with a long history of elaboration in literary sources.

John Heath, in the course of an argument that there is no evidence for a version of the Orpheus myth in which he succeeded in bringing Eurydice back to earth, writes as follows:

> There is no well-known individual in all Greek mythology *except Alcestis* [original emphasis] who dies and is returned to human life without cosmic repercussions which are soon remedied. There are plenty of symbolic and metaphorical rebirths in the catabases of various heroes (Odysseus, Theseus, Orpheus, Heracles, Aeneas), but

[1] On the pro-satyric question, see R. G. A. Buxton, 'Euripides' *Alkestis*. Five Aspects of an Interpretation', in J. Mossman (ed.), *Oxford Readings in Classical Studies. Euripides* (Oxford, 2003), 184–6 (first published in 1985); L. P. E. Parker (ed.), *Euripides. Alcestis* (Oxford, 2007), xix–xxiv; D. J. Mastronarde, *The Art of Euripides. Dramatic Technique and Social Context* (Cambridge, 2010), 54–7.

[2] The classic study is A. Lesky, *Alkestis. Der Mythos und das Drama* (Vienna, 1925); see also Parker (n. 1), xi–xv.

simple and unconditional resurrection to a second earthly life is limited to Alcestis. Additionally, the folktales upon which the tale seem to be based tell of the inevitable death of the prince's bride.[3]

Asclepius is one of the cases with cosmic repercussions which Heath has in mind. His supreme powers of healing breached the boundary between life and death and resulted in him being blasted by the thunderbolt of Zeus. A less edifying example is Sisyphus, who managed to trick his way back to life but ultimately joined the select group of egregious malefactors who were eternally tormented in the Underworld. These, in their different ways, are rule-proving exceptions which reinforce our understanding of the finality of death. The famous heroes mentioned by Heath are in a different category, since they managed to accomplish the feat of *catabasis* (descent) to the Underworld without actually dying. Heracles' visit to the Underworld is mentioned frequently in Euripides' *Heracles* (22–5, 117–18, 145–6, 262–3, 296–7, 490–1, 610–21, 717–19, 736, 770, 807–8, 1101, 1169–70), but as an heroic exploit rather than something relevant to the usual conditions of human mortality.

One apparent exception which Heath does not address is Glaucus, son of Minos, king of Crete, and his wife Pasiphae. In some versions he was restored to life by Asclepius and, as Heath remarks, 'The various recipients of Asclepius' gift of a second life (e.g. Capaneus, Hymenaeus, Lycurgus, Glaucus, Hippolytus, Tyndareus) must share in the responsibility for the physician's ultimate destruction'.[4] Heath mentions, but does not discuss, an alternative version of the story in which Glaucus was revived by the seer Polyidus, apparently without adverse consequences for either of them (Hyginus, *Fab.* 136; Apollodorus 3.3.17–20). This was the subject of Aeschylus' *Cretan Women*, Sophocles' *Seers*, and Euripides' *Polyidus*. Little had been known about any of these three lost plays, but we now have a papyrus with sixty lines from a scene in Euripides' *Polyidus* in which Polyidus tries to persuade Minos that reviving the dead is contrary to nature

[3] J. Heath, 'The Failure of Orpheus', *TAPhA* 124 (1994), 175. Heath's discussion is overlooked by S. I. Johnston, 'Many (Un)Happy Returns: Ancient Greek Concepts of a Return from Death and their Later Counterparts', in G. Ekroth and I. Nilsson (eds), *Round Trip to Hades in the Eastern Mediterranean Tradition. Visits to the Underworld from Antiquity to Byzantium* (Brill, 2018), 356–69.

[4] Heath (n. 3), 175 n. 20.

and to the laws of the gods.[5] It is unlikely that this passage is from an 'agon' (formal debate) scene, because no such scene in Euripides ends with one character doing what the other tells them to do, which is what would happen here if Polyidus obeyed Minos' command and attempted to revive Glaucus. It is more likely to be from an 'epideixis' scene in which 'one character makes a long speech in response to some provocative behaviour or proposal'.[6] An example is Ion's refusal to move from Delphi to Athens in Euripides' *Ion* (585–647), which is brushed aside by the addressee Xuthus (παῦσαι λόγων τῶνδ', εὐτυχεῖν δ' ἐπίστασο, 'Stop this talk and learn to be happy!', 650).[7] If Polyidus does indeed go on to revive Glaucus without adverse consequences then it would not just be a breach of Heath's law. Prophets in Greek tragedy are always right (for example, Tiresias in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* and Cassandra in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*), but in this case Polyidus would be proved wrong. In Greek literature generally, wise men advising tyrants are also always right (for example, Solon and Croesus in Herodotus, 1.30–45). The new papyrus thus makes it likely that Polyidus' warnings were eventually justified and the revival of Glaucus proved problematic, but we must await further papyrus discoveries to learn how Euripides dramatized this turn of events.

The ineluctability of death is not just a feature of Greek myth in general but is also one of the most prominent themes of *Alcestis* itself, and it is for this reason that the play had a great influence on epitaphs and consolation literature generally.[8] The chorus reflects on death: 'Neither oracles nor burnt offerings can avail now, not even the most distant oracles, only sought on grand occasions or in desperate need—those of Apollo in Patara or of Zeus Ammon (Amen-Ra) at the oasis of Siva.'[9] The servant remarks that Admetus, in begging

[5] B. Gehad, J. Gibert, Y. Trnka-Amrhein, 'P. Phil. Nec. 23 ↑: New Excerpts from Euripides' *Ino* and *Polyidos*', *ZPE* 230 (2024), 1–40.

[6] M. Lloyd, *The Agon in Euripides* (Oxford, 1992), 10.

[7] The first editors (n. 5) attribute a single line (17) to Minos in the middle of Polyidus' speech ('But isn't tyranny a safe. . .?', with the rest of the line missing), but numerous parallels suggest that it is an example of the rhetorical device of hypophora, in which the speaker rejects possible objections, often introduced as here by ἀλλά ('but'). The line should therefore be attributed to Polyidus. See Eur., *Hipp.* 966, 1013; J. D. Denniston, *The Greek Particles*, second edition (Oxford, 1954), 10–11; Lloyd (n. 6), 29–30.

[8] See R. Lattimore, *Themes in Greek and Roman Epitaphs* (Urbana, 1942), 46; Heath (n. 3), 175 n. 22.

[9] Lines 112–21 as paraphrased by A. M. Dale (ed.), *Euripides. Alcestis* (Oxford, 1954), note on 112 ff.

Alcestis not to die, is 'seeking the impossible' (202–3). Heracles' advice to the servant (773–802) is based on the belief that we only live once, and should therefore make the most of the life that we do have. These ideas are summed up by the chorus in an impressive ode (962–1005): nothing is more powerful than Necessity, it cannot be overcome by prayers, sacrifice, or by any Orphic or Asclepian lore, and even the edicts of Zeus must be in harmony with it. They tell Admetus to endure because he will not bring back the dead by weeping (985–6): even the children of gods must die.

Alcestis is unique or at least very unusual in Greek mythology in dying and returning to life without any further consequences. The problem is intensified in Euripides' *Alcestis* because fifth-century Greek tragedy is a realistic genre in the broad sense of representing actions which in general observe the laws of nature. In this it contrasts with the comedies of Aristophanes (*c.* 450–*c.* 385 BC), in which it is possible to fly to heaven on a dung beetle (*Peace*), build a city in the air (*Birds*), or interact with dead poets in the Underworld (*Frogs*). Euripides was particularly notable for his concern with making the events in his plays plausible in realistic terms. The temporary and miraculous rejuvenation of Iolaus in his *Children of Heracles* is described by the messenger as something that he heard from others and did not witness himself (847–8), which does not imply that it did not happen but does put it at two removes from what the audience actually sees on the stage. Other supernatural events in Euripides are also described rather than enacted, such as the bull from the sea (*Hippolytus* 1205–48), the effects of Medea's poison (*Medea* 1167–219), and the behaviour of the maenads (*Bacchae* 677–774).[10]

Euripides thus set himself a remarkable challenge in *Alcestis*, to present an event which violates a law of nature which is so unbreakable that it is on the whole observed throughout Greek mythology as well as being repeatedly affirmed in the play. This article will examine how he succeeds in doing so in a way which is dramatically convincing.

The first way he makes Alcestis' return to life plausible is to bring on stage a thoroughly anthropomorphic Thanatos (Death), who explains to Apollo in the first scene that he is able to spare her but chooses not to. He is initially afraid of Apollo, which prepares for the violence that he will actually suffer at the hands of Heracles. The play begins

[10] See generally M. Lloyd, 'Realism in Euripides', in A. Markantonatos (ed.), *Brill's Companion to Euripides* (Leiden, 2020), 603–24.

with Apollo addressing the house of Admetus. He explains that he had been sentenced by his father Zeus to a period of servitude to a mortal as punishment for killing the Cyclopes, forgers of the thunderbolt which Zeus had used to kill Apollo's son Asclepius. This great healer had transgressed the laws of human existence by bringing the dead back to life, although Apollo does not mention the reason for his punishment here. Admetus was the man whom Apollo served, and the opportunity to escape death was his reward for treating the god well. A notable feature of Euripides' treatment of the story is that there is an interval of unspecified duration between Alcestis' agreement to die and the day of her actual death, with several references to the day on which the play is set being 'the appointed day' (20–1, 27, 105, 158).

Apollo's entrance at the beginning of the play raises an interesting question of staging. Richard Buxton argues that it would be symbolically appropriate for him to enter from the house, and writes: 'Apollo's identification with the fortunes of Admetos is now over: the presence of the god from above is to be replaced by that of the god from below'.[11] An objection to this view is that Apollo's continuing favour is actually demonstrated by the death of Alcestis, which ensures the survival of Admetus, so his departure now cannot indicate the withdrawal of that favour. Nor is there any suggestion that Apollo's departure marks the end of his period of servitude, which seems to have been long in the past (568–605), or that his servitude coincides with his protection of the house. If his servitude has indeed ended, it is difficult to imagine what he would have been doing in the house at all. Thanatos is surprised to find him there, and wrongly assumes that he has come to rescue Alcestis. It therefore seems more likely that he enters by an *eisodos* (side entrance to the stage) to pay a visit on this significant day, rather than from the house, and that he needs to terminate his visit at the end of the scene in order to avoid the pollution of Alcestis' death (22–3).[12] The staging would thus resemble the beginning of Euripides' *Trojan Women*, when Poseidon visits the ruined city of Troy.

Apollo announces the arrival of Thanatos (24–7):

> Already I see Thanatos approaching,
> priest of the dead, who will take her

[11] Buxton (n. 1), 170.

[12] On gods avoiding pollution from contact with death, see R. Garland, *The Greek Way of Death* (London, 1985), 44.

to the house of Hades. He has arrived punctually,
keeping watch for this day on which she is due to die.[13]

Thanatos is carrying a sword (76), but there is no other reference in this scene to his appearance. The manuscripts have Heracles later refer to him as 'black-robed' (843), but modern scholars accept the plausible emendation 'black-winged', which seems to have been read by the scholiast (ancient commentator on the play). Thanatos is frequently winged in vase-painting, including the famous vase by Euphronios (late sixth century BC) representing the death of Sarpedon from Homer's *Iliad* (16.681–3). Emily Vermeule discusses the iconography of Sleep and Thanatos: 'During the course of the fifth century, as funeral painting increases its repertoire, they begin to carry off ordinary Greeks, and toward the end of the century they even take women, who had been nearly excluded from the serious world of Thanatos before; the development is contemporary with Euripides' *Alkestis*'.[14] The AD fourth-century Vergilian commentator Servius states that Euripides borrowed Thanatos and his sword from a lost play called *Alcestis* by the early tragedian Phrynichus (*c.* 500 BC). This is the only known precedent for personified death in Greek drama. The single surviving fragment of Phrynichus' play, a mere five words, is usually thought to be from a description of Heracles wrestling with Thanatos.

Thanatos resists Apollo's attempts to persuade him to spare Alcestis. The scene resembles Apollo's defence of his protégé Orestes from pursuit by the Furies in Aeschylus' *Eumenides* (458 BC). There is a vivid contrast in both plays between the arrogant young Apollo and older gods who refuse to be ousted from their traditional rights and duties. There is even a reference to Admetus in *Eumenides* (723–8), where the Furies cite Apollo's favour to him as a precedent for his outrageous treatment of older deities ('You persuaded the Fates to make humans immortal', as they say with a certain amount of exaggeration). Aeschylus supplies a detail which Euripides omits. In *Alcestis*, Apollo 'tricks' the Fates to allow Admetus to escape death (12, 32–4), but Aeschylus' Furies add that he did so by making them

[13] My literal translations from *Alcestis* correspond as far as possible to the lineation of the original, but are not intended to be verse.

[14] E. Vermeule, *Aspects of Death in Early Greek Art and Poetry* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1979), 150. Cf. N. W. Slater, *Euripides. Alcestis* (London and New York, 2013), 16, with 108 nn. 4–6; H. A. Shapiro, *Personifications in Greek Art. The Representation of Abstract Concepts, 600–400 B.C.* (Zurich, 1993), 132–48.

drunk (*Eumenides* 728). Thanatos is presented as inflexible and punctilious (52–7):

APOLLO: Is there any way that Alcestis could reach old age?
THANATOS: There is not. Understand that I too enjoy my privileges.
APOLLO: But either way you would not get more than one life.
THANATOS: I get a bonus when people die young.
APOLLO: But if she dies an old woman, she will receive a rich burial.
THANATOS: You are proposing a law for the benefit of the rich.

Thanatos' depiction in human terms is important for the development of the plot. He is alarmed at the sight of Apollo's bow (34–5), and will eventually be defeated in a wrestling match by Heracles. The eventual defeat of death is thus more credible than if it had been seen only in natural terms. Buxton aptly contrasts the style of case notes in the medical writer Hippocrates: 'seventh day: great chill; acute fever; much sweat; death'.[15]

Apollo concludes by predicting the rescue of Alcestis by Heracles (64–9):

I am telling you that you will yield, even though you are so cruel.
Such a man will come to the house of Pheres,
sent by Eurystheus to fetch the horses
from the wintry regions of Thrace,
and he is the man who will be entertained in the house of Admetus
and will take this woman from you by force.

Apollo speaks in an allusively prophetic style, but supplies corroborative detail and the prophecy will indeed come true. Thanatos is unimpressed and exits into the house (73–4):

You will get nowhere with your talk, however much you say.
The woman will go down to the house of Hades anyway.

Euripides often has such prophecies in the prologues of his plays, but can also cast doubt on them. Richard Hamilton writes: 'Thanatos does not believe Apollo and … Euripides has so constructed the scene as to give both gods equal weight.'[16] He goes on to show how the first part of the play comprises a series of scenes which combine

[15] Buxton (n. 1), 174.
[16] See R. Hamilton, 'Prologue Prophecy and Plot in Four Plays of Euripides', *AJPh* 99 (1978), 293.

to thwart our expectation of Heracles' rescue of Alcestis. The possibility of Alcestis being rescued has been raised, but uncertainty remains.

Thanatos concludes before going into the house (74–6):

> I go to her to begin the sacrifice with my sword,
> for that person is dedicated to the gods beneath the earth
> from whose head this sword has consecrated a lock of hair.

Vergil's description of the death of Dido has Juno send the messenger goddess Iris to cut a lock of her hair and thereby put an end to her life (*Aeneid* 4.693–705). Euripides treats the action more in accordance with Greek sacrificial practice, whereby the hair-cutting initiated the process which culminated in the death blow itself (for example Homer, *Iliad* 3.273; Aristophanes, *Birds* 959; Euripides, *Electra* 811–12). The technical term used here (*katarchesthai*) does indeed mean 'to make a beginning', and Thanatos has already been described as 'priest of the dead' (25). The staging implies that he does it as soon as he enters the house, but Alcestis does not actually die until line 392.[17]

Alcestis' extended death scene (244–392) is in two sections. In the first of them (244–79), she sings while Admetus mostly speaks in the iambic trimeters usual in tragic dialogue. This is death as experienced by a human being, rather than the personified figure seen earlier on the stage (252–6):

> I see the two-oared boat on the lake, I see it!
> and Charon the ferryman of the dead
> with his hand on his pole
> calls me now: 'Why do you delay?
> Hurry! You are keeping me back'. So he
> hurries me in his impatience.[18]

[17] S. D. Olson, 'Death and the Staging of Euripides' *Alcestis*', in F. Cortés Gabaudan and J. V. Méndez Dosuna (eds.), *Dic Mihi, Musa, Virum. Homenaje al Profesor Antonio López Eire* (Salamanca, 2010), 505–12, argues that Thanatos comes out again around line 258, and performs the hair-cutting on stage. He is addressing a technical issue of staging, since everywhere else in Greek tragedy a character who leaves the stage building when it represents a house needs to do so by the main door in view of the audience, and Thanatos will later be discovered at Alcestis' grave. There are, however, exceptions in two plays where the stage building represents a cave (Euripides' *Cyclops* and Sophocles' *Philoctetes*), and the movements of Thanatos cannot be constrained in such literal terms.

[18] Charon uses oars for the deeper water in the middle of Lake Acheron, and a pole for the marshy shallows (cf. Aristophanes, *Frogs* 137, 181–93): see Dale (n. 9), note on lines 252 ff.

There is a similar impatience in the divine voice which summons the aged Oedipus to his death: 'You there, Oedipus, why do we delay to go? You are late already!' (Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 1627–8).

Alcestis continues (259–63):

> Someone is leading me, leading me, leading me (do you not
> see him?) to the hall of the dead,
> winged Hades looking at me
> under his dark-gleaming brow.
> What are you doing? Let me go! What a road
> I am treading, most unhappy of women!

Her vision is unusually detailed and vivid, and describes her soul progressing into the Underworld. Dying is regularly described in the first part of the play as going to the house of Hades (25, 73, 237) or going below the earth (107, 163). 'Hades' is used metonymically to mean 'death' (for example, 13, 957). Euripides gives the impression that Alcestis is well advanced in her journey to the Underworld, but the only actual evidence is her vision. We have seen Thanatos, but only hear about Hades.

Alcestis then dies (266–72):

> Let me go now, let me go.
> Lay me down, I have no strength in my legs;
> Hades is near.
> Dark night spreads over my eyes.
> Children, children, your mother
> is no more, no more.
> Farewell, my children, and rejoice as you look on the light of the sun.

Admetus utters a brief and apparently hopeless plea to Alcestis not to die. What follows is very surprising, even if one is familiar with the conventions of Greek tragedy. Alcestis proceeds to make a speech, clear and well-constructed in the Euripidean manner, and apparently rather cool in tone. She reminds Admetus of what he owes her, contrasting her sacrifice with the failure of his parents to help, and requires of him that he does not remarry. He makes a long speech in reply, in which he expresses his grief in what have seemed to some readers to be exaggerated and tasteless terms. The following is an example (357–62):

> If I had the words and music of Orpheus,
> so as to bring you back from Hades by charming with my songs

> the daughter of Demeter or her husband,
> I would have gone down, and neither the dog of Pluto
> nor Charon the ferryman of souls at his oar
> would have stopped me before I restored your life to the light.

The daughter of Demeter is Persephone, wife of Hades and queen of the Underworld, and Pluto is an alternative name for Hades. The dog is Cerberus, who fawningly lets the dead into the Underworld but will not let them out. Admetus elaborates in detail on the inhabitants of the Underworld, believing that she is already in residence there, and we are led to expect that rescuing her would involve crossing Acheron and persuading Hades himself.

Admetus and Alcestis then have a brief dialogue, in which she hands over the children to her husband, before she dies again (385–92):

ALCESTIS:	My eye is heavy with darkness.
ADMETUS:	I am lost then, wife, if you are really leaving me.
ALCESTIS:	You may speak of me as no longer living.
ADMETUS:	Raise up your face! Do not leave your children!
ALCESTIS:	I do not leave them willingly. Farewell, my children.
ADMETUS:	Look upon them, look!
ALCESTIS:	I am no more.
ADMETUS:	What are you doing? Are you leaving us?
ALCESTIS:	Farewell.
ADMETUS:	I am lost, wretched me!
CHORUS:	She has gone, the wife of Admetus is no more.

The same motifs are repeated at the end of each section: darkness coming over the eyes (269, 385), 'I am no more' (270–1 and 387), farewell to the children (272, 389).

A. M. Dale, in her commentary on this passage, discusses the convention in Greek tragedy by which 'a situation is realized first in its lyric, then in its iambic aspect – that is to say, first emotionally, then in its reasoned form'.[19] John Gould has used the scene as a paradigm case of the way in which the use of different modes of presentation means that 'both the action and the stage figures should be seen and felt by us, the audience, as fragmented and discontinuous':

> [T]here is no point in asking what has *happened* [original emphasis] to (still less, inside) Alcestis to draw her back so sharply from the mouth of Hades. It is no good saying that

[19] Dale (n. 9), note on lines 280 ff.

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her realization that Admetus, even at the last, does not grasp the significance of her act gives her a sudden, sharp renewal of the will to live: of this there is no trace, no trace at all, in the language of Euripides' text. It is rather that the existence of two modes of presentation (the lyric and the spoken) causes—or allows—the act of dying to be displayed as it were in two facets which are simply seen in the theatre unmediated, juxtaposed, edge to edge.[20]

Gould is surely right that the scene cannot be interpreted in naturalistic terms, by speculating about what is happening inside Alcestis, but it is not so clear that it is typical of Greek tragedy in general.

It is indeed common in Greek tragedy for characters to express themselves first in (sung) lyric metres and then in (spoken) iambic trimeters, sometimes with no particular dramatic significance attached to the transition from one to the other. One example is in Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers*, where the great ritual lament over the tomb of Agamemnon (306–478) is followed by dialogue which covers some of the same ground (479–509). There is something similar in Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*, where the grievously wounded Heracles enters singing emotional and incoherent lyrics before making a speech which recapitulates and elaborates the same themes (1046–1111). In other cases it is made explicit that characters are making an effort to express themselves more clearly in the spoken section. There are two scenes of this kind involving the prophetess Cassandra. In Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, she utters inspired lyrics which are unintelligible to the chorus (1072–177), but then begins a speech in iambics by saying 'My prophecy will now no longer look out from behind veils like a newly-wedded bride...and I shall no longer instruct you with riddles' (1178–83). Similarly in Euripides' *Trojan Women*, Cassandra enters with a parodic wedding song, after which she advances a coherent explanation of her apparent euphoria: 'I shall demonstrate that Troy is happier than the Greeks; I may be inspired, but to this extent at least I shall stand outside my madness' (365–7). In other cases, the iambic speech defends a previous emotional outburst in lyrics. Sophocles' Electra thus begins her speech by saying to the chorus 'I am ashamed, women, if you think that I grieve too much with my many laments; but forgive me, since a hard compulsion forces me to do this' (Sophocles, *Electra* 254–7). Such justifications are sometimes provoked by explicit criticism or attempt at consolation (for example

[20] J. Gould, 'Dramatic Character and "Human Intelligibility" in Greek Tragedy', *PCPhS* 204 (1978), 50–1; reprinted in *Myth, Ritual, Memory, and Exchange. Essays in Greek Literature and Culture* (Oxford, 2001), 91–2.

Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus* 1367–8; Euripides, *Helen* 253–4). There is indeed an example of this in *Alcestis*, where Admetus makes a speech prompted by the chorus' attempt to console him (926–34), although here his previous utterances were in 'recitative' anapaests rather than sung lyrics.

There are thus many examples in Greek tragedy of a character moving from lyrics to iambics, and it may indeed be true that the fundamental point is that two contrasting modes of presentation of the same material are by convention presented in succession. On the other hand, tragedians usually make the transition from lyrics to iambics intelligible in psychological terms, and at least gesture towards continuity of character from one section to the other. This is also true in the superficially similar case of the dying Hippolytus, who merely wishes for death at the end of his lyrics but does not actually die (Euripides, *Hippolytus* 1385–8), and the transition to iambics coincides with his becoming aware of the presence of his patron goddess Artemis when he states that he feels some relief (1391–3). *Alcestis* thus is unique in that there is no explanation of the transition. The event which is depicted in this irregular manner is itself highly unusual and unnatural. Alcestis has chosen to die in order to save Admetus' life in a manner for which no physical explanation is given, and she will be saved from death in direct contravention of the laws of human existence whose validity is repeatedly affirmed in the play. Her ability to make a speech after she has apparently died is thus not a typical example of the discontinuity of character portrayal in Greek tragedy, even though the iambic continuation of the scene has formal parallels. The effect is highly unsettling, and creates an ambiguity in Alcestis' status between life and death.

The chorus sings an ode in praise of Alcestis, which begins with further reference to Hades and Charon (435–44):

> Daughter of Pelias,
> farewell, and gladly in the house of Hades
> may you dwell in the sunless house.
> Let Hades the black-haired god know and
> also the old man who sits at his oar and rudder
> as the ferryman of souls
> that by far by far the best woman
> he has conveyed across the Lake of Acheron
> with his two-oared boat.

The chorus believes that Alcestis has already crossed over into the Underworld, complete with Hades and Charon. This reinforces the

impression given earlier in the play, and we are not encouraged to doubt it, but it is still nothing more than a belief.

Admetus then welcomes his friend Heracles, who visits him on the way to his labour of capturing the man-eating horses of Diomedes. Admetus does not reveal that his wife has just died, and Heracles proceeds to feast boisterously in the palace. When he discovers the truth, he is so grateful for the hospitality which he has received from Admetus despite his mourning that he resolves to rescue Alcestis. His first plan is to ambush 'Thanatos, the black-winged lord of the dead' (843–4) as he drinks the blood of the sacrificial victims near the tomb, and hold him fast in a wrestling grip until he releases Alcestis. If he fails to find Thanatos by the tomb, Heracles' alternative plan is to go to 'the sunless house of those below, the Maiden and the King' (851–2) and ask them to return Alcestis. Hades was 'king of those below' (for example, Homer, *Iliad* 15.188, 20.61; Hesiod, *Theogony* 850; Aeschylus, *Persians* 629), and 'the Maiden' refers to his wife Persephone. This seems to make a clearer distinction than we have seen so far between Thanatos and Hades, which is reinforced when Admetus speaks of Thanatos 'handing over' Alcestis to Hades (871). A. M. Dale remarks: 'the choice of verb here certainly seems to convey the notion of two separate personalities, the one conceived of primarily as King of the Underworld, the other concerned with fetching thither the individual victim'.[21] Heracles, like Admetus, entertains the possibility of rescuing Alcestis from the Underworld itself, but he will not in the event need to do so.

Heracles later tells Admetus what actually happened (1139–42):

ADMETUS: How did you bring her up here into the light from below?
HERACLES: By joining battle with the god who had her in his power.
ADMETUS: Where do you say that you had this struggle with Thanatos?
HERACLES: I lay in ambush by the tomb, and seized him in my arms.

Euripides exploits a distinction between Thanatos and Hades so that Heracles rescues Alcestis before she has been delivered to Hades, although elsewhere we are given the impression that she actually went there. Commentators complain about inconsistencies in Euripides'

[21] Dale (n. 9), note on line 871; cf. Hamilton, (n. 16), 297–8.

presentation of the process of dying,[22] but they are actually part of a subtle strategy of suggesting that Alcestis went to the Underworld without committing himself to the possibility of rescuing her from it.

The dominant spatial imagery in *Alcestis* is of death as a journey. The cognitive scientist Mark Turner writes, with reference to this play: 'the spatial action-story of departure is projected onto the nonspatial event-story of death'.[23] The language of travel is indeed everywhere apparent: 'she has gone' (392, 394), she will go down into the Underworld (25–6, 47, 73, 107, 163, 237, 379, 618–19), cross Acheron (252–7, 443–4, 902), and 'dwell' in the house of Hades (436–7, 626–7; cf. 867). Admetus would go down to rescue or accompany her (360, 382), as would the chorus (455–9; cf. 985–6) and Heracles (850–4, 1072–4). There is also a literal journey outwards. Alcestis' *ekphora* ('funeral', literally 'carrying out', 422, 716) is described as her last journey (610). Heracles follows this journey outwards to the grave (843–9), but does not in the event need to follow her down to Hades (850–4). The Underworld is a 'house' (25, 73, 126, 436–7, 457, 626, 851–2, 867). Rush Rehm writes: 'the underworld is presented consistently as a counter-residence to that of the living, with halls, gates, and inner chambers'.[24] There is a reverse journey back into the house when Heracles brings Alcestis back ('receive her inside the house', 1097, 1110, 1114, 1147).

Heracles now enters, following the same route back from the grave. He brings with him a woman, whom he alleges he has won as a prize in an athletic competition, and asks Admetus to look after her. It is usually assumed that the woman is veiled, because Admetus fails to recognize her and remarks only that she is young to judge from her clothing and adornment (1050).[25] He insists on giving her to Admetus, who is forced, much against his will, to accept her (1118). Heracles now says, 'Look at her' (1121) and it seems that it is only at this point that her veil is removed, either by Heracles or Alcestis herself, and

[22] E.g. Dale (n. 9), note on lines 24–6 ('the two irreconcilable conceptions seem to hover in uncomfortable juxtaposition'); Parker (n. 1), note on lines 259–62 ('his vague conflation of Death and Hades seems at one moment to verge on the comic').

[23] M. Turner, *The Literary Mind* (Oxford, 1996), 31.

[24] R. Rehm, *Marriage to Death. The Conflation of Wedding and Funeral Rituals in Greek Tragedy* (Princeton, 1994), 85. On the topography of Hades in early Greek poetry, see Vermeule (n. 14), 33–7.

[25] The scholiast (ancient commentator) inferred from this that Alcestis is veiled; cf. Rehm (n. 24), 193 n. 23; Slater (n. 14), 110 n. 24. Parker (n. 1), note on line 1050, observes: 'Alcestis is still wearing the fine clothes and jewellery with which she went to the grave.'

Admetus finally realizes who the woman is. Euripides exploits the imagery of the Greek wedding, as Heracles plays the role of a father handing over the veiled bride to her new husband.[26]

A further issue then arises (1143–6):

> ADMETUS: Why does my wife stand there in silence?
> HERACLES: It is not yet permitted for you to hear her speak to you
> until she has been purified from her consecration
> to the gods below and the light of the third day comes.

One technical explanation of Alcestis' silence may be rejected. Earlier Greek tragedy only used two speaking actors, although the use of masks meant that these two actors could play several parts. There seems never to have been a limit on the number of non-speaking actors. Sophocles is credited with introducing the third speaking actor, which had been in use for at least twenty years by the date of *Alcestis*. Nevertheless, with Alcestis remaining silent in this scene the play could be performed by only two speaking actors, as could Euripides' *Medea* (431 BC). Of course, this does not mean that only two actors were actually used in either play, and it seems that *Telephus*, performed at the same festival as *Alcestis*, used three actors.[27] A more plausible approach is to see Alcestis' silence in ritual terms, although there will inevitably be a lack of real-life parallels for how to treat someone returning from the dead. Scholars cite Plutarch's account of the ritual conundrum posed by someone who has received a funeral *in absentia* and then turns out to be alive (*Quaest. Rom.* 264f–265a). Ritual restrictions applied to mourners and others who had been in contact with death, and *a fortiori* they might be expected to apply to someone who has actually been dead.[28]

Buxton may thus be right to see Alcestis' silence as a mark of transition from death back to life and to say, 'Even at the end, then, Alkestis is not yet fully alive'.[29] This recalls the statement of the woman-servant early in the play 'You can speak of her as both living and dead' (141), meaning that she was dying and that her fated death was certain. On the other hand, Admetus' statement 'She is

[26] See (e.g.) Buxton, (n. 1), 174–6, Rehm (n. 24), 89–90.
[27] See Rehm (n. 24), 196 n. 48; Slater (n. 14), 111 n. 27.
[28] The Plutarch passage is discussed by R. Parker, *Miasma. Pollution and Purification in Early Greek Religion* (Oxford, 1983), 61; he also discusses ritual restrictions on mourners (36–41). Cf. Garland (n. 12), 47, 100–1.
[29] Buxton (n. 1), 177.

alive and no longer alive' (521) is part of his deception of Heracles and need not be accepted as true. Her status may be ambiguous or transitional at the end of the play, but the story loses its point if she has never actually died.

Euripides set himself a remarkable challenge in *Alcestis*: to present an event which violates a law of nature which is so unbreakable that it is on the whole observed throughout Greek mythology as well as being repeatedly affirmed in the play. The first way he makes it plausible is to bring on stage a thoroughly anthropomorphic Thanatos, who explains to Apollo that he could spare Alcestis if he wanted but chooses not to do so. Thanatos is initially afraid of Apollo, which prepares for the violence which he will actually suffer at the hands of Heracles. Secondly, Euripides treats Alcestis' death as an extended process in which she is in an intermediate state between life and death both when she is dying and when she returns to life. Thirdly, the Underworld is presented as a concretely imagined location, with its traditional residents and geographical features, and the spatial imagery of death as a journey carries with it the implication that it can be travelled in reverse. Finally, Alcestis' arrival in the Underworld is presented indirectly, in the form of statements by the characters or projects for rescue which do not need to be implemented. This is consistent with Euripides' treatment of miracles in other plays. Alcestis' dying vision implies that she did indeed cross Acheron and enter the house of Hades, and the impact of her rescue would be diluted if she did not do so, but Euripides ultimately holds back from describing the impossible feat of a rescue from the Underworld.

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