

“When A God Contrives”

Γέννῳτο μέντᾶν πᾶν θεοῦ τεχνωμένου (*Ajax* 86)

Divine Providence in *Alcestis* and *Ajax*

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The significance of the gods' role in the numinous world of Greek Tragedy is axiomatic. Their interventions may be oblique, as in *Oedipus Tyrannus* or *Antigone*, or direct, as in *Eumenides*. They may actually appear on stage in prologues (*Prometheus*, *Ajax*, *Troades*, *Hippolytus*, *Bacchae*), for example, or as “knot-cutters” at the conclusions (*Eumenides*, *Philoctetes*, *Orestes*, Euripides' *Electra*). The god in a tragic prologue may set a far-reaching scheme of revenge in motion which it is the business of the play to resolve, as in *Troades*.

Such a divine prologue in *comedy* will outline the god's scheme for protection or reward, as in Menander's *Dyskolos* and Plautus' *Rudens*. Unique in tragedy, however, is its occurrence in Euripides' *Alcestis*. The scope of this article is to examine and compare the resolution of the gods' purposes as declared in the prologues to *Alcestis* and *Ajax*.

The assumption that Apollo's scheme as outlined in the prologue to *Alcestis* is well-intentioned (if also dimwitted) toward Admetus seems to be generally accepted. On the other hand, such a device is clearly more typical of New Comedy than of Tragedy. In Menander's *Dyskolos*, for instance, the prologue is delivered by Pan, who promises a swift revenge upon the crusty old Knemon (12), and a reward to his daughter for her piety towards both himself and the nymphs (36-44). Such revenge consists of a series of comic indignities, culminating in Knemon's being teased and abused by Sikon and Geta and forced to participate in the final comic revel (874-end).¹ Similarly in the *Rudens* (a comedy adapted from Diphilos) the star-god Arcturus announces and directs all rewards and punishments: for Daemones and his daughter and for the unscrupulous pimp, Labrax (11-31, 67-71). Both of those comedies end with feasts and betrothals, and even the “heavies” (or the blocking characters) are invited.

The prologue to *Alcestis* (1-76) is very similar in purpose. The strong mixture of comic and serious in a legendary setting may foreshadow Middle Comedy, or the tragicomedy of Plautus's *Amphitryo*,² where the complications produced by divine intervention

1. On the teasing conclusion of *Dyskolos*, see E. Keuls, “Mystery elements in Menander's *Dyskolos*,” *TAPA*, C (1969), 209-220.

2. Plaut. *Amph.* 51-63.

require further interventions (*ex machina*) to be put right, and to reconcile the husband and wife. There are obvious comic elements in *Alcestis*, of course, such as the roles of the drunken Heracles and the angry slave.³ To those elements add the willful teasing of Admetus by Heracles when he brings back the veiled Alcestis, and insists (by the claims of φιλοξενία) that he accept the beautiful mystery woman into his house; in so doing, he forces Admetus, ironically, to break his promise to the dying Alcestis with the most friendly of motives, just as Admetus had earlier placed *him* in an intolerable social position, and with equally generous motives. (Such harmless teasing-conclusions are also found in *Dyscolos*, *Rudens*, *Phormio*, and *Adelphoe*, for example.) Untragic elements in *Alcestis* are well-recognized. One ancient hypothesis classifies *Alcestis* as "σατυρικώτερον" ("rather like a satyr-play") because of its joyful ending: εἰς χαρὰν καὶ ἡδονὴν καταστρέφει παρὰ τὸ τραγικόν.⁴

The list of critical complaints against this play is long, and growing; particularly regarding Apollo and Admetus. Dale's catalogue of such views finds Admetus regarded variously as "bad-tempered, vain, shallow, egotistical, lying, hysterical, and insincere."⁵ Ferguson sees some "ugliness" in him.⁶ Nielson resents it that such a "blatant coward" should be rewarded, one whose perceptions of right and wrong are so doubtful.⁷ Even Sheppard, whose analysis is on the whole both positive and shrewd, views Admetus's virtue in accepting Heracles as "mechanical";⁸ Ferguson, as "an equivocal merit". Grube finds Apollo's conduct "dubious", and his dialogue with Thanatos "unsatisfying".⁹ Nielson further objects to the god's "fraudulent manipulation of death", and his "questionable liberality".¹⁰

What, in short, does Apollo actually *do* for Admetus, and what are his intentions? Does Admetus deserve it? How does he respond? First, reconsider the prologue. Apollo addresses

3. See C. R. Beye, *Alcestis by Euripides. A Translation and Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1974), p. 5, on the comic aspects of Heracles.

4. See A. M. Dale, *Euripides ALCESTIS. Edited with Introduction and Commentary* (Oxford, 1961), pp. xviii-xxii.

5. *Op. cit.*, pp. xxii-xxiii.

6. J. Ferguson, *A Companion to Greek Tragedy* (Austin & London, 1972), p. 520.

7. R. M. Nielsen, "Alcestis: A paradox in dying," *Ramus*, V (1976), 92. Nielsen's bibliographical survey is particularly useful.

8. J. T. Sheppard, "Admetus, Verrall, and Prof. Myers," *JHS*, XXXIX (1919), 39.

9. G. M. A. Grube, *The Drama of Euripides* (London, 1941), p. 129.

10. *Op. cit.*, 94. W. D. Smith ("The ironic structure in *Alcestis*," *Phoenix*, XIV [1960], 133) expects the audience to have little use for Admetus after the Pheres scene.

the house (δῶματα) of Admetus with affection, recalling his own bondage there (1-2), the reasons for it (3-7), and his subsequent protection of the house (οἶκον)¹¹ right to the present hour, as a manifestation of their reverence for each other. When we hear that Admetus has been rescued from death we know it is no insignificant event, for Apollo's own son, Asclepius, had also been punished terribly for a similar intervention (3-4). His own subsequent revenge on the Cyclopes had been punished in turn by Zeus by a year's bondage to a mortal, Admetus himself. There developed between them a deep and reverential friendship that led to Apollo's intervention. That year is recalled by the chorus at the play's axis (568-605), in response to Admetus' assertion of friendship's claims upon him, even when in mourning for his wife (553-567). His house is hymned as πολύξεινος and ἐλεύθερος, and the golden days of Apollo's sojourn are wistfully recalled. The chorus has no reservations about Admetus' merits (602): ἐν τοῖς ἀγαθοῖσι δὲ πάντ' ἔνεστιν σοφίας. In fact, their optimism rises dramatically as this ode ends (600-605) — in deliberate contrast to the ugly Pheres-scene which follows (614-746).¹²

The entrance of Heracles (476) recalls Apollo's opening prophecy (65-69); as do the ironic choral allusions and the prayer to Paean (92),¹³ the reprise of the fate of Apollo's son (123-126), the ironic despair in οὐδ' ἔστι κακῶν ἄκος οὐδέν (135), the attempt to console Admetus with "the inevitability of what a god has done" (279-299), and the lament over the powerlessness of the remedies given by Apollo to the Asclepiadai in overcoming *necessity* (970-971).

The punishments of both Asclepius and Apollo suggest that it would have been very risky for the god merely to resurrect Admetus when his fated day arrived. Apollo had to be wily to get his way: Μοίρας δολώσας (12). . . Μοίρας δολίω σφήλαντι τέχνῃ (33-34). It is interesting, however, that Death makes no mention

11. See A. P. Burnett, "The virtues of Admetus," *CP*, LX (1965), 240-255; reprinted in E. Segal, ed. *Euripides. A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J. [1968], p. 55); and Hans Diller, "Umwelt and Masse als dramatische Faktoren bei Euripides," in *Euripide, Entretiens sur l'antiquité classique*, VI, ed. Olivier Reverdin (Geneva: Fondation Hardt pour l'Etude de l'Antiquité Classique, 1960), pp. 91-92 (English trans. V. R. Wilson (ed.), *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Euripides' Alcestis* [Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968], p. 111) for the importance of the symbol of the "house" in *Alcestis*.

12. Ch. Cucuel ("Phérès, Admète et Hercule dans l'*Alceste* d'Euripide," *RPh*, II [1887], 21) sees the Admetus-Pheres scene as "tragic"; Grube (*op. cit.*, p. 139) regards it as central to the play.

13. W. D. Smith (*op. cit.*, 131, n. 7), also sees a special point in παιᾶνα (424).

here of the other tradition (where Apollo made the Fates drunk), but only of a deceitful trick. Since Death would surely have made the most of such a charge, (as did Aeschylus' Furies: *Eum.* 723ff), it would seem that Apollo had used something trickier: and now he leads Death on with fair words, even inviting him to be generous as a personal favour to him (48, 52, 60). But Death callously prefers his victims *young* (55).¹⁴ His last chance to reconsider his attitude comes with Apollo's prediction that someone will take away his prize by force, leaving him still both empty-handed and despised. The scowling ogre stamps off, having lost most of his claims to our sympathy, and leaves Apollo in a rather good light. (Similarities with the Athena-Furies trial scene in *Eumenides* are obvious.)

Apollo has already shown great devotion (δυσίότης) to his φίλοι even to the point of exacting revenge for them against the Cyclopes, and of suffering Zeus's reprisal. Allusions to his year with Admetus showed his profound respect and affection for his mortal master and friend (10, 23). He is credited even by his adversary with τέχνη (34), and he fittingly holds his temper, leading the latter on to convict himself of greedy partiality, not a proper and professional disinterest. So intent is Death upon his claimed prey (a god in the grip of ἄτη?) that he blindly dismisses Apollo's prediction out of hand (72-76). Later his very gluttony will betray him into the hands of Heracles (845).¹⁵

It would seem reasonable that the precise alteration made to Admetus' fate and all the implications of that, are of Apollo's choosing. Why, for instance, was not his mother or father simply *designated* as the substitute and taken? No, a "volunteer" was *specified* in the contract with the Moirae. Yet who more than Apollo (who had lived with the family for a year) would have foreseen that Alcestis alone would make such a sacrifice? *Cui bono*?

The most convincing view, I believe, is still that of J. T. Shepard (1919)¹⁶ who saw in the dénouement of the play the "education of Admetus to a better view of life" (1157-1158):

14. Aristophanes puts into Aeschylus' mouth (*Ran.* 1392) the line: μόνος θεῶν γὰρ Θανάτος οὐ δώρων ἐρᾷ.

15. See Smith's characterization of Death (*op. cit.*, 129), as a "bullying coward", a "democrat", and a "bad wrestler".

16. *Op. cit.*, 39. Cf. D. M. Jones, "Euripides' *Alcestis*," *CR*, LXII (1948), 50-55, and T. G. Rosenmeyer, *The Masks of Tragedy: Essays on Six Greek Dramas* (Austin, 1963), p. 242. Beye, however (*op. cit.*, 5), regards this as a "popular misreading . . . This conception of the play fails to take account of the scenes involving Heracles, which in no way advance Admetus' recognition of his folly. A substantial portion of the play must be explained away as peripheral." Smith (*op. cit.*, 133) has Admetus grow in awareness, but without recanting.

νῦν γὰρ μεθηρόμεσθα βελτίω βίον
τοῦ πρόσθεν· οὐ γὰρ εὐτυχῶν ἀρνήσομαι.

However, Sheppard has not really explained the nature of this education and of the "nobler life" that Admetus foresees; so it has never been fully accepted as genuine. It seems to me that the best way to document such a rehabilitation is first to contrast the attitudes of Alcestis and Admetus both to life and to each other as they appear early in the play, and then to follow the changes in Admetus' attitude, first after she dies (392-860), and then after she is buried (861-end). The rationale of Apollo's scheme (and Euripides' plot) may then become clearer.

In what, for Euripides, does the virtue of Alcestis consist?¹⁷ She is called ἀρίστη (83, 151, 152, 235, 442), κεδνή (97), πιστή (368), ἀξία (370), ἐσθλή (200), σώφρων (615). She is pious toward the gods (170), and she acts as a devoted mother to her whole household (769-70). The chorus of servants tell how maternally she would take their part when Admetus was angry (as he often was: κακῶν γὰρ μυρίων ἔρρῦετο, 770). Her personal feelings match all this praise and confirm it, for she is a very feeling woman, one might even say *sensuous*, to judge by the way she reacts to other people and to the world around her. For all that, she shows great modesty, performing her last religious duties with firm self-control (170-174). But once back in her own chamber, her flood of tears and the apostrophe to her bridal bed show us the depth of her feelings for her husband and the pain of her own decision, both sharpened by the thought of a new bride one day entering it (181-182).¹⁸ The agony of her private grief had appeared as she threw herself back upon her bed lamenting (188). She embraced her wailing children (189-191), and clasped the hand of each and every servant (192-195). Grief at parting from the world of light shows in her apostrophe to her present land and palace in Pherae and her bridal chamber in Iolcus (248-249). She urges upon Admetus the meaning of her own sacrifices: of the light of day (283), and of a new life with a second husband (284-285). Because she could not bear to live without him, her children orphaned (287-288a),

17. See C. R. Beye, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

18. P. Vellacott (*Euripides. Three Plays* [Penguin Books, 1953], p. 23) speaks of "the cold, remote Alcestis who honours her husband because it is in her bond to do so." Beye (*op. cit.*, p. 5) is sceptical about the certainty of Alcestis' love: "A prior decision to die does not prove a present love." Wilamowitz (*Griechische Tragödien*, vol. 3 [Berlin, 1906], pp. 86-87) supposed that Alcestis had agreed to the sacrifice as a "new love-sick bride" (Beye), but regretted it bitterly when the time arrived. Nielsen (*op. cit.*, 100), feels that Alcestis must ultimately share Pheres' opinion that she was foolish to die for Admetus.

she had not spared her own youth and its joys (286-289). Yet her own love of life was profound (301): the very pretext (ironically) used by Pheres to justify his refusal to take his son's place, and condemned strongly by Alcestis herself (290-294). In the end, Alcestis exacts Admetus' promise not to remarry and thereby impose a stepmother upon her children (305-308).¹⁹ There is no substitute for a real mother's devotion in such duties (319), duties which Admetus must now assume alone (371-373). Failure to keep the vow would bring dishonour (373) to her. Virtue is her boast (324): Alcestis' whole life is a celebration of *φιλία* in all its manifestations within the *οἶκος* toward husband, children, and household. She is uncompromising toward Admetus in urging his devotion to that ideal. She cannot forgive Pheres for betraying it.

One reason for the intensity of Alcestis' *φιλία* is her passionate nature. Love of life radiates from her: *ψυχῆς γὰρ οὐδέν ἐστι τιμιώτερον* (301) . . . ὅτε ζῆν χρῆν μ', ἀπέρχομαι κάτω (379). Her apostrophe to her bed and recollections of her bridal night (177-179a) suggest that her passionate love for Admetus contains *both* *φιλία* and *ἔρωσ*. Her horror at the thought of a new bride in her bed is not mere maternal jealousy (181).

The central symbol of Alcestis' passion for life and joy is her repeated appeal to the light of the sun, which Apollo represents.²⁰

Θανῶν πρὸ κείνου μηκέτ' εἰσορᾶν φάος (18).

The chorus echoes her appeal (151):

γυνή τ' ἀρίστη τῶν ὑφ' ἡλίῳ μακρῶ.

Alcestis' first words on stage come in a lyric lament (244-245):

19. See Beye, *op. cit.*, pp. 7, 10.

20. Cf. Bacchylides 3.79-80 for Apollo's words to Admetus. There are at least 12 occurrences of this sun/light image in *Alcestis* (e.g. 18, 151, 244, 272, 283, 394, 395, 437, 456, 472, 722, 851, 1139, 1146). See especially Cucuel, *op. cit.*, 19. Smith (*op. cit.*, 139-140) holds that "Most of the functional imagery in *Alcestis* is related to death and resurrection, ideas which are seldom out of the minds of any of the characters Running through the imagery, from the argument between white-robed Apollo and black-robed Thanatos, is a play and alternation between black and white, dark and light, hope and despair." S. A. Barlow (*The Imagery of Euripides* [London, 1971]) discusses the images of Charon and Hades (p. 56), of Death as an old man (p. 58), and of light (pp. 46, 58-59, 62). See also his comments on *Supplices* (p. 62), and *Antigone* (p. 60). Thornton Wilder is clearly very aware of the sunlight image, which he uses extensively in his *Alcestiad* or *A. Life in the Sun. A Play in three Acts, with a Satyr Play, The Drunken Sisters* (New York, Hagerstown, San Francisco, London, 1977). See M. McDonald's *Semilemmatized Concordance to Euripides' Alcestis* (Costa Mesa, CA, 1977).

“Αλιε καὶ φάος ἄμέρας,
οὐράνιοί τε δῖναι νεφέλας δρομαίου.

Her images here of sun, sky, clouds, and wind are sensuous. She enjoins her two children to behold the light of day as they bid her farewell (272):

χαίροντες, ὦ τέκνα, τόδε φάος ὀρῶτον.

When she dies, the grief of Eumelos, her young son, is expressed by the same sun image (393-395): μαῖα δὴ κάτω/βέβακεν, οὐκέτ' ἔστιν, πάτερ, ὕφ' ἄλιφ.

Hades is imagined by the chorus as “sunless” (ἀνάλιον: 437). They wish they could bring her back to the light (σε πέμψαι/φάος: 455-456), which is equated with youth and vitality (471-472):

σὺ δ' ἐν ἥβα/νέα προθανοῦσα φωτὸς οἴχη.

Heracles fulfills the chorus's wish (852-853) to bring her back: Κόρησ' Ἐνακτός τ' εἰς ἀνηλίους δόμους/αἰτήσομαι τε. He later announces that the “third light” (τρίτον φάος: 1146) will see Alcestis allowed to speak and completely restored to life and happiness.

Alcestis, then, has a profound love for life and the world in which she lives, and does have passionate, tender feelings for her husband and children.²¹

What of Admetus and *his* feelings? The riddling maidservant, like the chorus (145), is convinced that in spite of his certain knowledge that Alcestis is dying, he does not yet comprehend it or what pain will be his to suffer (196).²² Admetus, she predicts, will find his widowed life unliveable (241-243):

ὄστις ἀρίστης
ἀπλακῶν ἀλόχου τῆσδ' ἀβίωτον
τὸν ἔπειτα χρόνον βιοτεύσει.

21. Beyé's final estimate (*op. cit.*, p. 10) is, “Perhaps Alcestis' was the heroic act of trying to force Admetus' recognition of her worth as a person. She appears mute at the end of the play, as if implying that there should be no more rhetoric.” Plato, on the other hand, betrays no doubts about her love for her husband (*Symp.* 179D). A. P. Burnett (*Catastrophe Survived* [Oxford, 1971], p. 34-35) maintains that the concept of *romantic* love is unknown to Alcestis.

22. A. P. Burnett (*op. cit.*, CP, LX [1965], 241) sees no condemnation of Admetus: “one must accept the gift offered by a god.”

How can she be so sure of that prediction?

Admetus shows in the following *kommos* that he imagines their sufferings to be equal (246, 258). This will prove illusory, of course, just like his denial that the gods are acting (247). His life is shipwrecked (257), true, but perhaps not beyond rescue. With Sheppard, I see his expressions of grief as “not insincere”, but “extravagant and rhetorical” (e.g., 273-279, 328-368).²³ His vows of lifelong mourning and celibacy fit such a description: there will be no more symposia (343-344) or music (345-347). He shall place her statue in her bed and embrace it, though such comfort be cold (348-354a). Dreams of her will comfort him (354b-356). If only he had the tongue and melodies of Orpheus (357-362)! Ah, but he will join her afterwards, when *he* dies (363-368). His plea for her to take him with her (382), putting the blame on a “δαίμων” for taking her (384), does seem rather inconsistent with his acceptance of her sacrifice. Also inconsistent with the facts as we see them is Admetus’ obsession with “forsaking” (προδίδωμι).²⁴ Alcestis passionately wanted not to forsake Admetus (180); yet Admetus blindly supposes she is doing just that (202, 251, 275, 396), putting her ironically into the same category as Pheres (659). Perhaps the best illustration of Admetus’ highly *formal* response to his loss is the way he reacts to the attempt at rhetorical consolation by the chorus (416), who invoke conventional *topoi*: “necessity”, “not the first or last to lose a noble wife”, and “death is a debt”. He coolly *accepts* the logic of the consolation (ἐπίσταμαι γε: 420) and claims a full understanding of her coming death (420-422), for which there will be a year’s public mourning (413). Contrast with that the distress of their son (393-415), who *passionately* understands what it all means for those who remain: οὐκέτ’ ἔστιν, ὦ/πάτερ, ὑφ’ ἀλίφ (394-395). Alcestis has orphaned them “under the sun” by her suffering (397). Her lifeless eyes and mutely outstretched arms torment the child (399-400) as he calls her and falls upon her mouth with desperate kisses (401-403). But beyond his own loss and his sister’s, he intuitively understands his father’s, as well; for he will not have a true fullness of life in old age (412-414a). The entire household has been shattered:

οἰχομένης δὲ σοῦ, μᾶτερ, ὄλωλεν οἶκος (414b-415).

There are later echoes of that chorus after the funeral (891-894), but now Admetus’ feelings have changed dramatically:

23. *Op. cit.*, 39. Beye (*op. cit.*, p. 6) sees his emotions moving “from extravagance to hyperbole to reach a kind of acme of absurdity . . .”

24. There are at least 13 instances of words meaning betrayal: chiefly προδίδωμι and λείπω (e.g. 180, 202, 251, 275, 290, 659, 1096) and (386, 388, 391, 396, 406, 453).

- βαρέα μὲν φέρειν, ὅμως δὲ . . .
- τλάθ' ὄσ' οὐ σύ πρῶτος ἄλεσας . . .
- γυναῖκα συμφορὰ δ' ἑτέρους ἑτέρα
πιέζει φανεῖσα θνατῶν.²⁵

Here Admetus does not even acknowledge their attempt at consolation, but grieves that he had been prevented from leaping (like Prince Hamlet) into her grave! (895).

The chorus tries again at 928 to console him:

ἀλλ' ἔσωσας
βίον καὶ ψυχάν.
ἔθανε δάμαρ, ἔλιπε φιλιάν
τί νέον τόδε; πολλοῖς
ἦσι παρέλυσεν
θάνατος δάμαρτας.

This time, Admetus shifts to clear-headed trimeter (935-961) to answer the chorus. He now sees the difference between *seeming* and *being* (935-936):

φίλοι, γυναικὸς δαίμον' εὐτυχέστερον
τοῦμοῦ νομίζω, καίπερ οὐ δοκοῦνθ' ὅμως.

While Alcestis has freedom from pain, *plus* good repute intact, he at last realizes that *his* future life will be one of unrelieved grief (937-940): ἄρτι μανθάνω.²⁶ The prediction of the maidservant (πρὶν ἂν πάθῃ: 145) is now fulfilled. His house is desolate. How can he look at the bed where she slept and at the chair where she sat (945-946a)? At his unkept house and weeping children (946b-948)? He will be unable to bear weddings and women's gatherings (950b-953). Worst perhaps will be the shame of what he has done, which his enemies will use against him (954-960a). He has failed shamefully as a husband and a son. How can life be preferable to honour (960b-961)?

τί μοι ζῆν δῆτα κέρδιον, φίλοι,
κακῶς κλύοντι καὶ κακῶς πεπραγόντι;²⁷

But at the same time, Admetus does seem to have gained something: a strange new sense of his own previously unrealised inner feelings for Alcestis. His tender use of the dual is expressive (900-902):

δύο δ' ἀντὶ μιᾶς . . . ὁμοῦ . . . διαβάντε.

25. Grube (*op. cit.*, p. 136) sees a shift from "unnatural" laments to the "simple and profound".

26. See D. M. Jones, *op. cit.*, CR, LXII (1948), 50-55.

27. Beye (*op. cit.*, p. 9) is one critic who doubts that anything has been gained.

We can see it now in his thoughts of his wedding, when the torches burned bright and he held Alcestis' hand with joyous wedding hymns echoing around them (915-921). What a noble match! But now, epithalamium has changed to dirge, white robes to black; the marriage bed is empty (922-925). This is a moving echo of Alcestis' passionate reverie of their wedding and its consummation in love (177-179a). The emergence of a passionate side to Admetus' character was first hinted in the first Kommos after the funeral (861ff). Now his own house is hateful, like the *sight of the sun* and even the *feel of the earth* under his feet (868-867).

Note Admetus' attitude when Heracles enters a second time.²⁸ Although he still desperately conceals his feelings from his friend under a cloak of riddles (1037ff), he has clearly not reverted to his earlier *sang-froid* in discussing his actions. In fact, the thought of taking possession of the strange woman Heracles brings agitates him violently.²⁹ He is strangely stirred by her youth and beauty (1049-1050). Erotic thoughts of her being violated in his house prey upon him (1051-1054), and even of her lying in Alcestis' bed (1055-1061a). How much the beauty of her body reminds him of Alcestis (1061b-1063)! Powerful, sensuous emotions (strange and new to him) have seized his mind and heart ("ἡρημένον": 1065):

Θολοῖ δὲ καρδίαν, ἐκ δ' ὀμμάτων
πηγαῖ κατερρώγασιν. ὦ τλήμων ἐγώ,
ὡς ἄρτι πένθους τοῦδε γεύομαι πικροῦ. (1067b-1069)

Even his grief itself has now reached a new intensity not felt before, and he "tastes" it in all its bitterness. ἔρωξ τις, "a strange passion" (1080), is now in control of him. As this teasing continues, Heracles tries out the conventional adage that "time heals all wounds" (1085), but Admetus will still not accept such consolation. When Heracles insists that Admetus will wish to remarry, he draws an indignant response from him: "σίγησον· οἶον εἶπας!" But Admetus quickly softens: "οὐκ ἄν ὀφόμεν" (1088). Admetus admits to the charge of "folly" (1093-1094) for his oath not to remarry, and now prefers death to "betrayal" (1096). Here once

28. If Ebeling is right (*TAPA*, XXIX [1898], 65-85, and also D. J. Conacher, *Euripidean Drama, Myth, Theme and Structure* [Toronto, 1967], pp. 327-333) that Euripides introduced Heracles to the story, then the element of surprise is very important: certainly the difference between a play where Admetus wrestles Death, and one where Heracles does so bears directly upon the satyr-aspects of the Euripidean version. But see Dale (*op. cit.*, xii-xiv). Beye also points out the mechanisms of the *peripeteia*, in which a knowing host becomes ignorant, and an ignorant guest becomes the knowing one, and exploits his new advantage (*op. cit.*, pp. 6-7). Cucuel sees an unexpected "delicatessen" in Heracles (*op. cit.*, 23).

29. Beye, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

more he echoes the “dead” Alcestis (180). As Heracles’ teasing catechism continues (exacting sweet revenge for those earlier riddles), Admetus is torn by his sworn oath, his love for Alcestis and his cherished obligations to his guest-friend (1100):

καὶ δρῶν γε λύπη καρδίαν δηχθήσοι.³⁰

Then Heracles’ language becomes more riddling yet — almost mystical:

νικῶντι μέντοι καὶ σὺ σιννικῶς ἐμοί (1103).
ἄπεισιν, εἰ χροῖ πρῶτα δ’ εἰ χρεῶν ἄθρει (1105).

Admetus’ weakening resolve is gradually eroded by both his concern for Heracles’ feelings and, I believe, a blend of intuition and passion (ἔρωσ τις). Admetus begins to yield, in both trepidation and blind trust, to a combination of mystical urging and enigmatic assurances (1107-1110). After one last agonised, conscience-stricken attempt to avoid taking personal possession of the mysterious woman, he capitulates (1118):

καὶ δὴ προτείνω, Γοργόν’ ὡς κατατομῶν.
ἔχεις; ἔχω; ναί.³¹

Only then does Heracles release him from his misery, and invite him to remove the veil and look, and understand that his is the act of a *true* friend (γενναῖον ξένον 1120), for Admetus’ prayers have been granted (1132).

Admetus’ passionate exclamation confirms his joy (1133):

ὦ φιλτάτης γυναικὸς ὄμμα καὶ δέμας.³²

The strain of this comic reversal is so great that Heracles utters an apotropaic oath (φθόνος δὲ μὴ γένοιτό τις Θεῶν: 1135) and pays reverence to the chthonic powers by ordering three days’ silence from her (1144-1146). The tragic funeral and the burial veil change to comic revel and a bridal veil (1154-1156). The bonds of φιλοξενία are reasserted on either side (1151-1153).

Euripides’ anapestic tag (1159-end) proclaims the gods’ power to reverse misfortunes far beyond human expectations. In context,

30. “The long-run result is the return of Alcestis, but with a testing of Admetus that reveals all the ethical dilemmas of his situation” (Beye, *op. cit.*, p. 7). Smith, (*op. cit.*, pp. 8-9), compares Orestes’ testing of Electra in Sophocles, but sees very different loyalties being tested. Wilson considers Admetus still “incorrigibly obtuse” at the end (*op. cit.*, p. 9).

31. This is similar to the kind of dialectical ἀπορία we find in Plato.

32. This subject was thoroughly addressed by G. N. Daugherty in a paper read to the Classical Association of the Midwest and South, at Williamsburg, Virginia (April 26, 1984): Wedding imagery in Euripides’ *Alcestis* 1008ff.”

τῶν δ' ἄδοκῆτων πόρον ἤρε Θεός (1162) refers to Apollo. But what exactly has Apollo achieved? It is clear from Admetus' own words that a profound change has come over him. Before Alcestis' funeral, his overriding concern is φιλοξενία, a virtue for which he is widely and justly renowned.³³ More deeply felt kinds of φιλία (especially ἔρωσ) are emotions (or obligations) which he seems to take for granted. He does not regard Alcestis as really distinct from his other φίλοι (355-356), although he does make special claims upon her φιλία (264, 279, 340, 376). While the chorus envies the φιλία they share as a couple (συνδυάδος φιλίας: 473), the maid contrasts Alcestis' perceptions with Admetus' (145):

οὔπω τόδ' οἶδε δεσπότης, πρὶν ἂν πάθῃ.

But change will come. Admetus will understand through experience. Apollo had been their guest (ξενωθείς: 68), and he fully understands their natures as individuals and as spouses. He knows the flaw in their οἶκος and their happiness: that Admetus does not understand his wife's passionate love for him — or even his own for her, because it is blocked by his overriding concern for his ξένοι. It is this that prevents the full and perfect joy which they deserve together.

What were Apollo's options?³⁴ If he had simply negotiated unconditionally a long life for him, Admetus would have been no further ahead, not even if he had resurrected him from the dead! Even if his mother or father had taken his place, would he have been any happier? He must see that Alcestis' sense of φιλία is unique and whole. Only through his shame at "forsaking" her will he come to understand. Of course his suffering would have been catastrophic and truly tragic if she had not been wrested from the clutches of the ogre Death and restored to him. It must be all or nothing, if they are both to have the fulness of joy Apollo and Heracles believe he deserves.

Who is actually to be blamed for the breach of contract with the Moirae? Since Thanatos does not actually deliver *anyone* to the underworld, *he* must be held ultimately responsible. (Thanks to Heracles, who wins her back, fair and square.) Such is not the stuff of tragedy! That is the reason Euripides makes Death the

33. J. R. Wilson (*op. cit.*, p. 8) speaks of "two acts of daring, the heroic sacrifice of Alcestis and the heroic hospitality of Admetus [which] result, through the mediation of Heracles in the miraculous salvation of both."

34. D. J. Conacher ("Structural aspects of Euripides' *Alcestis*," in *Greek Poetry and Philosophy: Studies in Honour of Leonard Woodbury*, ed. D. Gerber [Chico, CA, 1984], p. 74), sees Apollo as "powerless to prevent Death from now exacting his due." And yet he shall prevent it ultimately, and knows he will do so via his surrogate, Heracles.

leering villain, so unwilling to oblige the fair-spoken Apollo. With a fine irony Admetus' "excessive" concern for his guest-friends (ἄγαν ἐκεῖνός ἐστ' ἄγαν φιλόξενος: 809) is rewarded by the perfecting of his own sense of φιλία toward his wife: from φιλοξενία to ἔρωσ. Apollo, as the god of light, prophecy, healing, balance and wholeness, successfully completes Admetus' therapy. And what of Zeus, who punished Apollo once before for interfering with life and death? May we not sense his approval in the comic intervention of Heracles, son of Ζεὺς ξένιος?

The doubts, common among this play's critics, that Admetus has in any way gained more than he has lost do seem unnecessary, as do, perhaps, the intricate structures of irony which Smith, Conacher, and others have explored to explain its coherence and meaning.³⁵ One should begin an interpretation by admitting that Admetus is an obviously flawed character. Apollo's actions (and Heracles' of course) make sense as a providential scheme to restore Admetus to health and happiness — and to his wife. Restoring *Alcestis* to Admetus was the easy part!³⁶

The ancient label "σατυρικότερον" for *Alcestis* does explain its function, that of giving the light relief required by a tragic trilogy of stories about bad women,³⁷ where the male characters are far from heroic. "Tragicomedy", however, does seem to be the best generic term for a play of such infinite variety. The female protagonist is unassailably loyal, virtuous, and loving, and the brilliant *peripeteia* is joyful and comic, and in the end free from ill omen. That the *Alcestis* can touch us still is a tribute to the "τραγικώτερος" of Attic dramatists.

As with Apollo's providential intervention in *Alcestis*, Athena's purposes in Sophocles' *Ajax* are not immediately apparent, but are crucial in our understanding of the play. Bernard Knox has examined her role with his typical thoroughness.³⁸ He does not go so far as F. Allègre or J. Moore, who see her as "méchante et cruelle . . . capricieuse", and "perplexing, not to say fiendish",³⁹ but he

35. Conacher (*op. cit.*, p. 80) explores the "potentially tragic theme": ". . . the poet, as it were, takes the edge off the theme of tragic knowledge, by reducing it, in Admetus' final speech, to the more sordid terms of domestic decline and neighbourhood gossip . . . The realizations . . . expressed in the final *kommos* and episode convey what the poet feels would be the more human and tragic results of Admetus' situation, were it not encapsulated in its 'miraculous' frame."

36. H. E. Barnes ("Greek Tragicomedy", *CJ*, LX [1964-1965], 125-31) believes that *Alcestis* meets the criteria for tragicomedy. This is a very useful survey of the comic aspects of *Alcestis*.

37. See Ferguson, *op. cit.*, pp. 513-514. Cf. G. Murray, *Euripides and His Age*[*1] (London, 1913, pp. 73-80.

38. B. M. Knox, "The *Ajax* of Sophocles," *HSCP*, LXV (1961), 1-37.

39. See Knox, *op. cit.*, 29 (n. 2).

does find "her attitude is the most disturbing . . . nothing as vengeful and fierce as this since Aeschylus put the Eumenides on stage . . . rigid adherence . . . refinement of mockery."⁴⁰ Knox compares her to Euripides' Aphrodite and Dionysus for vindictiveness, and (unfavorably so) with the enlightened and sympathetic Odysseus of the play.⁴¹ At the same time, he calls her attitude "consistent" (Ajax is an old foe, Odysseus an old ally) and "just": (exposing Ajax's madness is for her more than vindictive, it is a "necessary step in his condemnation", for in saving the Atreidae, she proves his guilt. She "thwarts and mocks . . . baffles and convicts."⁴²

What is the evidence in the text for Athena's real attitude towards Ajax? She admits to causing his madness, and to turning his wrath against the livestock (yet to be apportioned among the Greeks as spoils) and the herdsmen (51-54), as he invaded the very entrance to Agamemnon's and Menelaus' quarters (49). Ajax is utterly convinced that he is acting against the Atreidae and their Greek allies, as we learn from Tecmessa (282-330). Athena is convinced that he would have accomplished his revenge had she not intervened (45):

κἄν ἐξέπραξεν, εἰ κατημέλησ' ἐγώ.

Sophocles portrays Ajax as going too far in his pride (οὐ κατ' ἄνθρωπον φρονῶν: 777), and thus incurring Athena's displeasure. According to Calchas, Ajax had once told Telamon that he trusted completely in his own might, and did not need the gods' help (768-769). In battle he told Athena to help the others, for he could hold his position alone (774-775). Such words had brought her "undesired anger" upon him (ἀστεργῆ . . . ὀργήν: 776-777). At first hand, however, we hear him asking confidently for her continuing aid (116-117):

χωρῶ πρὸς ἔργον· τοῦτο σοὶ δ' ἐφίεμαι,
τοίανδ' αἰεὶ μοι σύμμαχον παρεστάναι.

Earlier he had sworn his devotion to her (91-93):

ὦ χαῖρ' Ἀθάννα, χαῖρε Διογενὲς τέκνον,
ὡς εὖ παρέστης· καί σε παγχρύσοις, ἐγὼ
στέψω λαφύροις τῆσδε τῆς ἄγρας χάριν.

40. Knox, *op. cit.*, 6.

41. *Ibid.*

42. *Op. cit.*, 7.

Athena reciprocates his earlier term for her, “σύμμαχος” (90), but charges that he is not living up to *his* obligations in the alliance. Calchas, who was much alarmed at Ajax’s words (ὕψικόμπως κάφρόνως ἡμείψατο: 766), was in no doubt that Ajax’s wrath would last for only one day (756-757); should he survive it, he would be safe (748-755: 778-779). Ajax and Athena seem earlier, like Admetus and Apollo, to have enjoyed a good relationship. Her previous concern for him in battle, and her regard for him now as the greatest of the Greeks appears even during her wrath (119):

τούτου τίς ἄν σοι τάνδρὸς ἢ προνούστερος.

Because of this prevailing attitude, we need to consider her final remarks (131-133):

ὥς ἡμέρα κλίνει τε κἀνάγει πάλιν
ἅπαντα τὰθρόπεια· τοὺς δὲ σώφρονας
θεοὶ φιλοῦσι καὶ στυγοῦσι τοὺς κακοῦς.

It would be very wrong to regard Ajax, any more than Admetus, as “κακός” just because his σωφροσύνη is flawed. It is rather the “nets” (ἔρκη: 60) into which Athena has driven him that are κακά, and the delusion to which he is yoked (123). There is no evidence that Athena harbours anything more than a *short-lived* anger against Ajax. In applying a punishment which is so devastating while it lasts, however, she invites the final denouement through Ajax’s *own* choice and character.

One could even say that Athena’s intervention (Ajax’s madness) is as much aimed at protecting Agamemnon and Menelaus as at punishing Ajax, a motivation paralleled both in Homer and in tragedy. In *Iliad* I, Achilles is enraged by Agamemnon’s contemptuous treatment of him. He is in the act of drawing his sword when Athena intervenes, pulling his hair to stop his rage (195), because she had regard for them both (197). In *Odyssey* 24 she intervenes to allow the old Laertes one final deed of prowess (516): to slay Eupheithes, a witless war-monger. Then she commands that the quarrel stop, lest Zeus be angry (541-52): ἴσχεο, παῦε δὲ νεῖκος. The best tragic parallel, perhaps, is her intervention in Euripides’ *Heracles*. Madness (*Lyssa*) is compelled by Hera and Iris to make Heracles mad (843-853), a madness which (like Ajax’s), however, will soon pass (866). Heracles kills his wife and children (922-1015) under the delusion that he is destroying Mycenae, and killing Eurystheus and his children in revenge. In his madness he is about to kill his own father, Amphitryon (imagining it is *Eurystheus’* father), when Athena intervenes and stuns him with a rock (1002-1003a):

ὅς νιν φόνου μαργῶντος ἔσχε κείς ὕπνου
καθῆκε.

When he awakes he is sane once more. His grief and horror know no bounds at the terrible anagnorisis, but Theseus finally persuades him to come to Athens for purification and for his eventual canonization as a hero (1331).

To reassess Athena's actions in the *Ajax*, let us consider the plot alternative Sophocles *rejected*. If Athena had *not* maddened Ajax, he would have killed the Atreidae, and possibly Odysseus as well; which would have left him forever with the reputation of a madman, not a hero. (The same fate would have been Achilles'.) Ajax's only possible fate then could have been death and execration, not proper burial and status as a hero (406-408): "the goal to which the poet brings Ajax."⁴³ Odysseus' intervention at the conclusion (1316-1401) reflects Athena's continuing concern for him. It is a masterpiece of persuasion, based on a deep understanding of both the worth and the tragic dilemma of his friend-turned-foe. Odysseus' respect for Ajax is sincere (1318-1319):

τί δ' ἔστιν, ἄνδρες; τηλόθεν γὰρ ἠσθόμην
βοῆν Ἀτρειδῶν τῶδ' ἐπ' ἀλικίμῳ νεκρῶ.

He also affirms his regard for Agamemnon as friend and comrade (1328-1329), which is fully reciprocated (1330-1391). Odysseus invokes "the laws of heaven" (τοὺς θεῶν νόμους: 1343) as the final arbiters, and pronounces Ajax second only to Achilles (1340-1341), with a nobility deserving of burial. Ajax's claims to Achilles' armour (100, 441-446) are vindicated in death; perhaps Odysseus feels (as he did in the *Odyssey*) some personal responsibility for what has happened. It is ironic that the maxim of Bias cited earlier by Ajax could apply to Odysseus just as well (678), for he can see the nobility of character in a foe (1355), which Agamemnon cannot. Therefore, he puts his own case in terms of enlightened self-interest (1365, 1367), offering Agamemnon a point of agreement (1368) to save face. After the chorus heartily approve Odysseus' wisdom and tact (1374-1375), he regrets the mutability of friendship (1377), and Ajax's basic nobility (1380). His willingness to assist with the funeral, and Teucer's reluctance to allow it, can be understood against the passage in the *Odyssey* where the ghost of Ajax refuses to speak to Odysseus (11.543-567). There Odysseus deeply regrets winning the armour (548) because it had caused the death of a comrade whose beauty and valour were exceeded

43. Sir R. Jebb, *Sophocles. The Plays and Fragments. Part VII, The Ajax* (Cambridge, 1896), pp. xxx-xxxii; S. M. Adams, *Sophocles the Playwright* (Toronto, 1957), p. 24.

only by Achilles' (550-551). Ajax's blame goes to Athena and Zeus: Zeus because he hated the Greeks, Athena because she preferred Odysseus. (Sophocles makes no mention of that.) Homer intriguingly suggests that the two might yet have conversed, had not Odysseus been eager to move on (565-567). Ajax's prayer for vengeance on the Atreidae corresponds to Odysseus' reply to Agamemnon's tale of woe (*Od.* 11.404-434):

... γόνον Ἀτρείδος εὐρύοπα Ζεὺς / ἐκπάγλως ἔχθαιρε (436-437).

Sophocles' treatment of Odysseus and Ajax here is consistent with Homer's. The *fact* of Ajax's burial as given by Homer (*Od.* 11.549) is essential to any interpretation:

τοῖην γὰρ κεφαλὴν ἔνεκ' αὐτῶν γαῖα κατέσχευεν.

When Sophocles presents a sympathetic Odysseus to assure a burial for Ajax, he is drawing upon the most common literary source. Athena's bias in favour of Odysseus in the *Ajax* is not surprising, since Homer had already made her support his cause, not Ajax's, for the arms of Achilles (547).⁴⁴

Sophocles' play has been convincingly read by Jebb⁴⁵ and Adams,⁴⁶ as an *apologia*, harmonizing his historical hero-status with the "facts" of his triple disgrace: his loss of the arms, his attempted murder of the Atreidae, and his madness. His own prestige, Athena's intervention, Odysseus' sympathy, the affections of Teucer and Tecmessa, and finally his own character, in which we see courage, self-reliance, shame, love, and tenderness, portray a personality both heroic and human. Like Homer's Achilles and Euripides' Heracles, Athena marks Sophocles' Ajax as a mortal destined for immortality. "Saint and martyr rule from the tomb." Sophocles' dramatic innovation in the legend of Ajax is the role he gives Athena. Though enigmatic, she is persistent and ultimately providential. "It is her own verdict that Ajax shall have burial."⁴⁷

In both *Ajax* and *Alcestis*, then, the deity of the prologue works providentially on behalf of an esteemed protégé: the Athena of tragedy for Ajax's honour, prestige and hero-status, the Apollo of tragicomedy for Admetus' self-understanding and happiness, and for *Alcestis*' very life. (Hero-status awaits neither of them.) The

44. See Pausanias 1.35.3 for Ajax's statue and shrine in the Athenian agora, and for the altar of Eurysaces in the city. As Jebb points out (p. xxx-xxxii) no Athenian could enter the theatre of Dionysus without being aware of Ajax's hero-status.

45. See Jebb, *op. cit.*, pp. xl-xli.

46. Adams, *op. cit.*, p. 24. (See also pp. 25, 27-28, 35.)

47. For a harshly critical assessment of Ajax's claim to heroism in life see now, C. E. Sorum, "Sophocles *Ajax* in Context," *CW*, LXXIX (1986), 361-377.

mortal agents are, respectively, Odysseus and Heracles, each of whom is actually first given some cause for resentment against his friend, but goes on then to intervene decisively in the course of events, by either skilled rhetoric or brute force. In each case the dramatist's goal is a rehabilitation. *Ajax* is full tragedy, of course: the suffering and death of the protagonist ends with his due burial, which in turn will secure his established hero-status in Athens. *Alcestis*, as a comical-tragedy, presents death and burial not as the end, but as a mystic veil which parts to reveal the healing of a personality, the renewal of a marriage, and a perfected earthly life for the noblest of couples.

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