

# ALCESTIS

*Translated by* RICHMOND LATTIMORE

# ALCESTIS: INTRODUCTION

## *The Play: Date and Composition*

Euripides' *Alcestis* was produced in 438 BCE at the Great Dionysian Festival in Athens as one of four plays in a tetralogy of which the other three plays have been lost: *The Cretan Women*, *Alcmaeon in Psophis*, and *Telephus*. Euripides took the second prize that year behind Sophocles. Although *Alcestis* is Euripides' earliest securely dated play, he was probably in his forties at the time and had been competing in the dramatic contests for over fifteen years (though he had not won his first victory until 441).

Ancient scholars reported that *Alcestis* was performed fourth in Euripides' tetralogy that year and thus took the place of the satyr-play, the comic play centered on Dionysus and his troop of ribald satyrs that usually followed the three serious and lofty tragedies in any entry in the dramatic competition. Ancient scholars also pointed out the elements of the play that reminded them more of comedy or of satyr-plays than of tragedy—above all, the fact that events turn out happily in the end. They even suggested that *Alcestis* was not to be considered a genuine tragedy. Modern scholars have continued to debate this question. Just what kind of play is *Alcestis*? To which genre or genres, if any, should it be assigned?

## *The Myth*

*Alcestis* tells how the god Apollo tries to reward Admetus, king of the town of Pherae in Thessaly, for his hospitality to him by arranging that a substitute die in the king's stead on the fated day of his death. Admetus' parents refuse to sacrifice their lives for him, but his wife, Alcestis, agrees to do so. After she dies, Admetus' friend Heracles shows up; Admetus conceals the news of Alcestis' death and receives him with great hospitality.

When Heracles discovers what has happened, he wrestles with Death, defeats him, and leads Alcestis back to Admetus.

The story of the man doomed to die who seeks, and sometimes finds, a substitute willing to die in his place is a widespread motif of folktales from many places and ages. Familiar too from folktales, though less widely attested, is the idea that a hero can wrestle with Death and rescue someone from his clutches. But there are few if any traces of such topics in surviving Greek literature before Euripides. The only important predecessor about whom we have any information is the Greek tragedian Phrynichus, active at the end of the sixth century and the beginning of the fifth century BCE: an *Alcestis* is listed among his works, and the few fragments and references to this lost play that can be gleaned from later authors indicate that it probably included some of the same characters who appear in Euripides' version (especially Apollo, Death, and Heracles) and that Phrynichus may have been the one who invented the fundamental idea of Alcestis being rescued from the dead. Although the main characters of Euripides' play were certainly familiar to his audience, at least as names, it is likely that the specific plot Euripides constructed for them was surprising and fresh.

### *Transmission and Reception*

After Euripides, comic and tragic dramas about Alcestis were occasionally produced by other Greek and Roman authors; at Rome, Alcestis was also a subject for pantomimes. About these later dramatic versions we know too little to be able to say how much Euripides' play influenced them. So too, there are only occasional references to the story of Alcestis among ancient poets and prose writers, who did sometimes mention her briefly as a celebrated example of a loyal wife but generally did not pause to consider in any depth her psychology or her husband's. But there are at least two remarkable instances of the influence of the *Alcestis* in late antiquity: a Latin poem entitled *Alcesta*, which narrates the myth in 162 verses, all recycled entirely from the works of Virgil; and a papyrus of the fourth century CE, recently discovered in Barcelona, which bears 122 lines of a semidramatic poem in Latin about the story of Alcestis and Admetus, demonstrating some knowledge of Euripides' play.

The play survived as a text in the schools and for some private readers, and it belongs to the group of ten plays by Euripides that were most widely diffused during ancient and medieval times. More even than in literature, *Alcestis* enjoyed remarkable popularity in ancient pictorial art. She appears especially on Roman sarcophagi, presumably as an exemplar of conjugal fidelity and of hopes for the afterlife. Unsurprisingly, the scene that is most often depicted is that of Heracles leading her back from the dead.

In modern times *Alcestis* has never been among Euripides' most popular plays and has not often been staged. But it has provided the inspiration for various successful dramatic and operatic versions, including operas by Philippe Quinault (1674), George Frideric Handel (1727), and especially Christoph Willibald Gluck (1767), and plays by Christoph Martin Wieland (1773; satirized by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in the same year), Vittorio Alfieri (1806), and Hugo von Hofmannsthal. The Victorian poet Robert Browning interpreted the story of *Alcestis* in his *Balaustion's Adventure* (1871); other notable lyric versions include those by Rainer Maria Rilke (1904), Erica Jong (ca. 1973), and Donald Justice (1979). In the theater, more or less radical transformation of the Euripidean model has inspired such very different plays as T. S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party* (1949), Thornton Wilder's *The Alcestiad; or, A Life in the Sun* (1955), Efua Sutherland's *Ghanan Edufa* (ca. 1962), and Marguerite Yourcenar's *Le mystère d'Alceste* (1963), as well as Martha Graham's dance drama *Alcestis* (1960). It has also been depicted in several modern paintings (Jacques-Louis David, 1767; Eugène Delacroix, 1851–52, 1862) and sculptures (Auguste Rodin, 1899).

# ALCESTIS

## *Characters*

APOLLO

DEATH

CHORUS of citizens of Pherae

MAID, attendant of Alcestis

ALCESTIS, wife of Admetus

ADMETUS of Pherae, king of Thessaly

BOY, <sup>o</sup> son of Admetus and Alcestis

HERACLES, friend of Admetus

PHERES, father of Admetus

SERVANT of Admetus

*Scene: Pherae, in Thessaly, in front of the house of Admetus*

*(Enter Apollo from the house, armed with a bow.)*

APOLLO

House of Admetus, in which I, god though I am,  
had patience to accept the table of the serfs!

Zeus was the cause. Zeus killed my son, Asclepius,  
and drove the bolt of the hot lightning through his chest.

5 I, in my anger for this, killed the Cyclopes,  
smiths of Zeus's fire, for which my father made me serve  
a mortal man, in penance for what I did.

I came to this country, tended the oxen of this host  
and friend, Admetus, son of Pheres, and have kept

10 his house from danger until this very day.  
For I, who know what's right, have found in him  
a man who knows what's right, and so I saved him  
from dying, tricking the Fates. The goddesses promised me  
Admetus would escape the moment of his death  
by giving the lower powers someone else to die  
15 instead of him. He tried his loved ones all in turn,  
father and aged mother who had given him birth,<sup>o</sup>  
and found not one, except his wife, who would consent  
to die for him, and not see daylight any more.  
She is in the house now, gathered in his arms and held  
20 at the breaking point of life, because destiny marks  
this for her day of death and taking leave of life.  
The stain of death in the house must not be on me. I  
step therefore from these chambers dearest to my love.  
And here is Death himself, I see him coming, Death  
25 who dedicates the dying, who will lead her down  
to the house of Hades. He has come on time. He has  
been watching for this day on which her death falls due.

*(Enter Death from the side, armed with a sword.)*

DEATH [*chanting*]

*Ah!*

*You at this house, Phoebus? Why do you haunt*  
30 *the place? It is unfair to take for your own*  
*and spoil the death-spirits' privileges.*  
*Was it not enough, then, that you blocked the death*  
*of Admetus, and overthrew the Fates*  
*by a shabby wrestler's trick? And now*  
35 *your bow hand is armed to guard her too,*

*Alcestis, Pelias' daughter, though she  
promised her life for her husband's.*

APOLLO

Never fear. I have nothing but justice and fair words for you.

DEATH [*now speaking*]

If you mean fairly, what are you doing with a bow?

APOLLO

40     It is my custom to carry it with me all the time.

DEATH

It is your custom to help this house more than you ought.

APOLLO

But he is my friend, and his misfortunes trouble me.

DEATH

You mean to take her corpse, too, away from me?

APOLLO

I never took his body away from you by force.

DEATH

45     How is it, then, that he is above ground, not below?

APOLLO

He gave his wife instead, and you have come for her now.

DEATH

I have. And I shall take her down where the dead are.

APOLLO

Take her and go. I am not sure you will listen to me.

DEATH

Tell me to kill whom I must kill. Such are my orders.

APOLLO

50 No, only to put their death off. They must die in the end.

DEATH

I understand what you would say and what you want.

APOLLO

Is there any way, then, for Alcestis to grow old?

DEATH

There is not. I insist on enjoying my rights too.

APOLLO

You would not take more than one life, in any case.

DEATH

55 My privilege means more to me when they die young.

APOLLO

If she dies old, she will have a lavish burial.

DEATH

What you propose, Phoebus, is to favor the rich.

APOLLO

What is this? Have you unrecognized talents for debate?



DEATH

Those who could afford to buy a late death would buy it then.

APOLLO

60 I see. Are you determined not to do this favor for me?

DEATH

I will not do it. And you know my character.

APOLLO

I know it: hateful to mankind, loathed by the gods.

DEATH

You cannot always have your way where you should not.

APOLLO

For all your brute ferocity you shall be stopped.

65 The man to do it is on the way to Pheres' house  
now, on an errand from Eurystheus, sent to steal  
a team of horses from the wintry lands of Thrace.  
He shall be entertained here in Admetus' house  
and he shall take the woman away from you by force,  
70 nor will you have our gratitude, but you shall still  
be forced to do it, and to have my hate beside.

DEATH

Much talk. Talking will win you nothing. All the same,  
the woman will go with me to Hades' house. I go  
to her now, to dedicate her with my sword,  
75 for all whose hair is cut in consecration  
by this blade's edge are devoted to the gods below.

*(Exit Death into the house, Apollo to the side. Enter the Chorus.)*

CHORUS<sup>o</sup> [*chanting*]

*It is quiet by the palace. What does it mean?  
Why is the house of Admetus so still?  
Is there none here of his family, none  
80 who can tell us whether the queen is dead  
and therefore to be mourned? Or does Pelias'  
daughter Alcestis live still, still look  
on daylight, she who in my mind appears  
noble beyond  
85 all women beside in a wife's duty?  
[singing individually, not as a group]*

FIRST CITIZEN

STROPHE A

*Does someone hear anything?  
a groan or a hand's stroke or outcry  
in the house, as if something were done  
and over?*

SECOND CITIZEN

*No. And there is no servant stationed  
90 at the outer gates. O Paeon,  
healer, might you show in light  
to still the storm of disaster.*

THIRD CITIZEN

*They would not be silent if she were dead.*

FOURTH CITIZEN

*No, she is gone.* <sup>o</sup>

FIFTH CITIZEN

*They have not taken her yet from the house.*

SIXTH CITIZEN

95     *So sure? I know nothing. Why are you certain?*  
          *And how could Admetus have buried his wife*  
          *with none by, and she so splendid?*

SEVENTH CITIZEN

ANTISTROPHE A

*Here at the gates I do not see*  
          *the lustral spring water, approved*  
100     *by custom for a house of death.*

EIGHTH CITIZEN

*Nor are there cut locks of hair at the forecourts*  
          *hanging, such as the stroke of sorrow*  
          *for the dead makes. I can hear no beating*  
          *of the hands of young women.*

NINTH CITIZEN

105     *Yet this is the day appointed.*

TENTH CITIZEN

*What do you mean? Speak.*

NINTH CITIZEN

*On which she must pass to the world below.*

ELEVENTH CITIZEN

*You touch me deep, my heart, my mind.*

TWELFTH CITIZEN

*Yes. He who from the first has claimed to be called*  
110 *a good man himself*  
*must grieve when good men are afflicted.*

*[all singing together]*

STROPHE B

*Sailing the long sea, there is*  
*not any shrine on earth*  
*you could visit, not Lycia,*  
115 *not the unwatered sanctuary of Ammon,*  
*to redeem the life*  
*of this unhappy woman. Her fate shows*  
*steep and near. There is no god's hearth*  
120 *I know you could reach and by sacrifice*  
*avail to save.*

ANTISTROPHE B

*There was only one. If the eyes*  
*of Phoebus' son Asclepius could have*  
*seen this light, if he could have come*  
125 *and left the dark chambers,*  
*the gates of Hades.*  
*He upraised those who were stricken*  
*down, until from Zeus' hand*  
*the flown bolt of thunder hit him.*  
130 *Where is there any hope for life*  
*left for me any longer?*

*[now chanting]*

*For all has been done that can be done by our kings now,  
and there on all the gods' altars  
are blood sacrifices dripping in full,  
135 but no healing comes for the evil.*

*(Enter Maid from the house.)*

CHORUS LEADER

But here is a serving woman coming from the house.  
The tears break from her. What will she say has taken place?  
We must, of course, forgive your sorrow if something  
has happened to your masters. We should like to know  
140 whether the queen is dead or if she is still alive.

MAID

I could tell you that she is still alive or that she is dead.

CHORUS LEADER

How could a person both be dead and live and see?

MAID

It has felled her, and the life is breaking from her now.

CHORUS LEADER

Such a husband, to lose such a wife! I pity you.

MAID

145 The master does not see it and he will not see it  
until it happens.

CHORUS LEADER

There is no hope left she will live?

MAID

None. This is the day of destiny. It is too strong.

CHORUS LEADER

Surely, he must be doing all he can for her.

MAID

All is prepared so he can bury her in style.

CHORUS LEADER

150     Let her be sure, at least, that as she dies, there dies  
the noblest woman underneath the sun, by far.

MAID

Noblest? Of course the noblest, who  
will argue that?  
What shall the wife be who  
surpasses her? And how  
could any woman show that she  
loves her husband more  
155     than herself better than by consent  
to die for him?  
But all the city knows that well. You  
shall be told  
now how she acted in the house, and  
be amazed  
to hear. For when she understood  
the appointed day  
was come, she bathed her white  
body with water drawn  
160     from running streams, then opened

the cedar chest and took  
her clothes out, and dressed in all  
her finery  
and stood before the shrine of  
Hestia, and prayed:  
“Mistress, since I am going down  
beneath the ground,  
I kneel before you in this last of all  
my prayers.  
165 Take good care of my children for  
me. Give the boy  
a loving wife; give the girl a noble  
husband;  
and do not let my children die like  
me, who gave  
them birth, untimely. Let them live a  
happy life  
through to the end and prosper here  
in their own land.”  
170 Afterward she approached the altars,  
all that stand  
in the house of Admetus, made her  
prayers, and decked them all  
with fresh sprays torn from living  
myrtle. And she wept  
not at all, made no outcry. The  
advancing doom  
made no change in the color and  
beauty of her face.  
175 But then, in their room, she threw  
herself upon the bed,  
and there she did cry, there she  
spoke: “O marriage bed,

it was here that I undressed my  
maidenhood and gave  
myself up to this husband for whose  
sake I die.

180 Good-bye. I hold no grudge. But  
you have been my death  
and mine alone. I could not break  
my faith with you and him:  
I die. Some other woman will  
possess you now.

She will not be better, but she might  
be happier.”

She fell on the bed and kissed it. All  
the coverings  
were drenched in the unchecked  
outpouring of her tears;  
185 but after much crying, when all her  
tears were shed,  
she rolled from the couch and  
walked away with eyes cast  
down,

began to leave the room, but  
turned and turned again

to fling herself once more upon the  
bed. Meanwhile  
the children clung upon their  
mother’s dress, and cried,  
190 until she gathered them into her  
arms, and kissed  
first one and then the other, as in  
death’s farewell.  
And all the servants in the house  
were crying now



in sorrow for their mistress. Then  
she gave her hand  
to each, and each one took it, there  
was none so mean  
195 in station that she did not stop and  
talk with him.  
This is what Admetus and the house  
are suffering. Had  
he died, he would have lost her, but  
in this escape  
he will keep such pain; it will not  
ever go away.

CHORUS LEADER

Admetus surely must be grieving over this  
200 when such a wife must be taken away from him.

MAID

Oh yes, he is crying. He holds his wife close in his arms,  
imploring her not to forsake him. What he wants  
is impossible. She is dying. The sickness fades her now.  
She has gone slack, just an inert weight on the arm.  
205 Still, though so little breath of life is left in her,  
she wants to look once more upon the light of the sun,  
since this will be the last time of all, and never again.<sup>o</sup>  
She must see the sun's shining circle yet one more time.  
Now I must go announce your presence. It is not  
210 everyone who bears so much good will toward our kings  
as to stand by ready to help in their distress.  
But you have been my master's friends since long ago.

*(Exit Maid into the house.)*

CHORUS<sup>o</sup> [*singing*]

STROPHE

- O Zeus, Zeus, what way out of this evil  
is there, what escape from this  
which is happening to our princes?*
- 215 *A way, any way?<sup>o</sup> Must I cut short my hair  
for grief, put upon me the black  
costume that means mourning?  
We must, friends, clearly we must; yet still  
let us pray to the gods. The gods  
have power beyond all power elsewhere.*
- 220 *Paeon, my lord,  
Apollo, make some way of escape for Admetus.  
Grant it, oh grant it. Once you found  
rescue in him. Be now  
in turn his redeemer from death.*
- 225 *Oppose bloodthirsty Hades.*

ANTISTROPHE

- Admetus,  
O son of Pheres, what a loss  
to suffer, when such a wife goes.  
A man could cut his throat for this, for this  
and less he could bind the noose upon his neck*
- 230 *and hang himself. For this is  
not only dear, but dearest of all,  
this wife you will see dead  
on this day before you.*

*(Enter Alcestis carried from the house on a litter, supported  
by Admetus and followed by her children and servants.)*

*But see, see,  
she is coming out of the house and her husband is with her.  
Cry out aloud, mourn, you land  
235 of Pherae for the bravest  
of wives fading in sickness and doomed  
to the Death God of the world below.*

*[now chanting]  
I will never again say that marriage brings  
more pleasure than pain. I judge by what  
240 I have known in the past, and by seeing now  
what happens to our king, who is losing a wife  
brave beyond all others, and must live a life  
that will be no life for the rest of time.*

ALCESTIS *[singing in the following interchange with Admetus, while he  
speaks in reply]*

STROPHE A

*Sun, and light of the day,  
245 O turning wheel of the sky, clouds that fly.*

ADMETUS

*The sun sees you and me, two people suffering,  
who never hurt the gods so they should make you die.*

ALCESTIS

ANTISTROPHE A

*My land, and palace arching my land,*

*and marriage chambers of Iolcus, my own country.*

ADMETUS

250     Raise yourself, my Alcestis, do not leave me now.  
          I implore the gods to pity you. They have the power.

ALCESTIS

STROPHE B

*I see him there at the oars of his little boat in the lake,  
the ferryman of the dead,  
Charon, with his hand upon the oar,  
255     and he calls me now: "What keeps you?  
Hurry, you hold us back." He is urging me on  
in angry impatience.*

ADMETUS

          The crossing you speak of is a bitter one for me;  
          ill starred; it is unfair we should be treated so.

ALCESTIS

ANTISTROPHE B

*Somebody takes me, takes me, somebody takes me,  
260     don't you see, to the courts  
of dead men. He frowns from under dark  
brows. He has wings. It is Hades.  
Let me go, what are you doing, let go.  
  Such is the road  
most wretched I have to walk.*

ADMETUS

Sorrow for all who love you, most of all for me  
265 and for the children. All of us share in this grief.

ALCESTIS

EPODE

*Let me go now, let me down,  
flat. I have no strength to stand.  
Hades is close to me.  
The darkness creeps over my eyes. O children,  
270 my children, you have no mother now,  
not any longer. Daylight is yours, my children.  
Look on it and be happy.*

ADMETUS [*now chanting*]

*Ah, a bitter word for me to hear,  
heavier than any death for me.  
275 Please by the gods, do not be so harsh  
as to leave me, please, by your children forlorn.  
No, up, and fight it.  
There would be nothing left of me if you died.  
All rests in you, our life, our not  
having life. Your love is what we hold sacred.*

ALCESTIS [*speaking*]

280 Admetus, you can see how it is with me. Therefore,  
I wish to have some words with you before I die.  
I put you first, and at the price of my own life  
made certain you would live and see the daylight. So  
I die, who did not have to die, because of you.  
285 I could have taken any man in Thessaly  
I wished and lived in queenly state here in this house.

But since I did not wish to live bereft of you  
and with our children fatherless, I did not spare  
my youth, although I had so much to live for. Yet  
290 your father, and the mother who bore you, betrayed you,  
though they had reached an age when it was good to die  
and good to save their son and end it honorably.  
You were their only one, and they had no more hope  
of having other children if you died. That way  
295 I would be living and you would live the rest of our time,  
and you would not be alone and mourning for your wife  
and tending motherless children. No, but it must be  
that some god has so wrought that things shall be this way.  
So be it. But swear now to do, in recompense,  
300 what I shall ask you—not enough, oh, never enough,  
since nothing is enough to make up for a life,  
but fair, and you yourself will say so, since you love  
these children as much as I do; or at least you should.  
Keep them as masters in my house, and do not marry  
305 again and give our children a stepmother  
who will not be so kind as I, who will be jealous  
and raise her hand to your children and mine. Oh no,  
do not do that, do not. That is my charge to you.  
For the new-come stepmother hates the children born  
310 to a first wife; no viper could be deadlier.  
The little boy has his father for a tower of strength.°  
But you, my darling, what will your girlhood be like,  
how will your father's new wife like you? She must not  
315 make shameful stories up about you, and contrive  
to spoil your chance of marriage in the blush of youth.  
Indeed, your mother will not be there to help you

when you are married, not be there to give you strength  
when your babies are born, when only a mother's help will do.  
320 For I must die. It will not be tomorrow, not  
the next day, or this month, the horrible thing will come,  
but now, at once, I shall be counted among the dead.  
Good-bye, be happy, both of you. And you, my husband,  
can boast the bride you took made you the bravest wife,  
325 and you, children, can say, too, that your mother was brave.

CHORUS LEADER

Fear nothing; for I dare to speak for him. He will  
do all you ask. If he does not, it's his mistake.

ADMETUS

It shall be so, it shall be, do not fear, since you  
were mine in life, you still shall be my bride in death  
330 and you alone, no other girl in Thessaly  
shall ever be called wife of Admetus in your place.  
There is none so marked out in pride of father's birth  
nor other form of beauty's brilliant gleam. I have  
these children, they are enough; I only pray the gods  
335 grant me the bliss to keep them as we could not keep you.  
I shall go into mourning for you, not for just  
a year, but all my life while it still lasts, my dear,  
and hate the woman who gave me birth always, detest  
my father. These were called my own dear ones. They were not.  
340 You gave what was your own and dear to buy my life  
and saved me. Am I not to lead a mourning life  
when I have lost a wife like you? I shall make an end  
of revelry and entertainment in my house,  
the flowers and the music that here once held sway.

345 No, I shall never touch the lute strings ever again  
nor have the heart to play music upon the pipe  
of Libya, for you took my joy in life with you.  
The skillful hands of craftsmen shall be set to work  
making me an image of you to set in my room;  
350 I'll pay my devotions to it, hold it in my arms  
and speak your name, and clasp it close against my heart,  
and think I hold my wife again, though I do not,  
cold consolation, I know it, and yet even so  
I might drain the weight of sorrow. You would come  
355 to see me in my dreams and comfort me. For they  
who love find a time's sweetness in the visions of night.  
Had I the lips of Orpheus and his melody  
to charm the maiden Daughter of Demeter and  
her lord, and by my singing win you back from death,  
360 I would have gone beneath the earth: not Pluto's hound  
Cerberus could have stayed me, not the ferryman  
of ghosts, Charon at his oar. I would have brought you back  
to life. Wait for me, then, in that place, till I die,  
and make ready the room where you will live with me,  
365 for I shall have them bury me in the same chest  
as you, and lay me at your side, so that my heart  
shall be against your heart, and never, even in death  
shall I go from you. You alone were true to me.

CHORUS LEADER

And I, because I am your friend and you  
370 are mine, shall help you bear this sorrow, as I should.

ALCESTIS

Children, you now have heard your father promise me



that he will never marry again and not inflict  
a new wife on you, but will honor my memory.

ADMETUS

I promise again. I will keep my promise to the end.

ALCESTIS

375 On this condition, take the children. They are yours.

ADMETUS

I take them, a dear gift from a dear hand.

ALCESTIS

And now  
you must be our children's mother, too, instead of me.

ADMETUS

I must be such, since they will no longer have you.

ALCESTIS

O children, this was my time to live, and I must go.

ADMETUS

380 Ah me, what shall I do without you all alone?

ALCESTIS

Time will soften this. The dead count for nothing at all.

ADMETUS

Oh, take me with you, for god's love, take me down there too.

ALCESTIS

No, I am dying in your place. That is enough.

ADMETUS

O god, what a wife you are taking away from me!

ALCESTIS

385 It is true. My eyes darken and the heaviness comes.

ADMETUS

But I am lost, dear, if you leave me.

ALCESTIS

There is no use  
in talking to me any more. I am not there.

ADMETUS

No, lift your head up, do not leave your children thus.

ALCESTIS

I do not want to, but it is good-bye, children.

ADMETUS

Look at them—oh, look at them!

ALCESTIS

390 No. There is nothing more.

ADMETUS

Are you really leaving us?

ALCESTIS

Good-bye.

ADMETUS

Oh, I am lost.

CHORUS LEADER

It is over now. Admetus' wife is gone from us.

BOY<sup>o</sup> [*singing*]

STROPHE

*O wicked fortune. Mother has gone down there,  
father; she is not here with us  
395 in the sunshine any more.  
Poor mother, she went away  
and left me to live all alone.  
Look at her eyes, look at her hands, so still.  
400 Hear me, mother, listen to me, oh please,  
listen, it is I, mother,  
I your little one lean and kiss  
your lips, and cry out to you.*

ADMETUS

She does not see, she does not hear you. You two and I  
405 all have a hard and heavy load to carry now.

BOY

ANTISTROPHE

*Father, I am too small to be left alone  
by the mother I loved so much. Oh,  
it is hard for me to bear  
all this that is happening,  
410 and you, little sister, suffer  
with me too. <sup>o</sup> Oh, father,  
your marriage was useless, useless; she did not live  
to grow old with you.*

415      *She died too soon. Mother, with you gone away,  
the whole house is ruined.*

*(Exit Alcestis carried into the house, followed by children and servants.)*

CHORUS LEADER

Admetus, you must stand up to misfortune now.  
You are not the first, and not the last of humankind  
to lose a good wife. Therefore, you must understand  
death is an obligation claimed from all of us.

ADMETUS

420      I understand it. And this evil which has struck  
was no surprise. I knew about it long ago,  
and knowledge was hard. But now, since we must bury our dead,  
stay with me and stand by me, chant in response the hymn  
to the god below who never receives libations.  
425      To all Thessalians over whom my rule extends  
I ordain a public mourning for my wife, to be  
observed with shaving of the head and with black robes.  
The horses that you drive in chariots and those  
you ride single shall have their manes cut short with steel,  
430      and there shall be no sound of pipes within the city,  
no sound of lyres, until twelve moons have filled and gone;  
for I shall never bury any dearer dead  
than she, nor any who was better to me. She deserves  
my thanks. She died for me, which no one else would do.

*(Exit into the house.)*

CHORUS [*singing*]

STROPHE A

435     *O daughter of Pelias*  
          *my wish for you is a happy life*  
          *in the sunless chambers of Hades.*  
          *Now let the dark-haired lord of Death himself, and the old man,*  
440     *who sits at the steering oar*  
          *and ferries the corpses,*  
          *know that you are the bravest of wives, by far,*  
          *ever conveyed across the lake*  
          *of Acheron in the rowboat.*

ANTISTROPHE A

445     *Much shall be sung of you*  
          *by the men of music to the seven-strung mountain*  
          *lyre-shell, and in poems that have no music,*  
          *in Sparta when the season turns and the month Carneian*  
          *comes back, and the moon*  
450     *rides all the night;*  
          *in Athens also, the shining and rich.*  
          *Such is the theme of song you left*  
          *in death, for the poets.*

STROPHE B

455     *Oh, that it were in my power*  
          *and that I had strength to bring you*  
          *back to light from the dark of death<sup>o</sup>*  
          *with oars on the sunken river.*  
460     *For you, O dearest among women, only you*  
          *had the hard courage*  
          *to give your life for your husband's and save*  
          *him from death. May the dust lie light*  
          *upon you, my lady. And should he now take*

465      *a new wife to his bed, he will win my horror and hatred,  
mine, and your children's hatred too.*

ANTISTROPHE B

*His mother would not endure  
to have her body hidden in the ground  
for him, nor the aged father:°  
He was theirs, but they had not courage to save him.  
470      Oh shame, for the gray was upon them.  
But you, in the pride  
of youth, died for him and left the daylight.  
May it only be mine to win  
such wedded love as hers from a wife; for this  
is given seldom to mortals; but were my wife such, I would have her  
475      with me unhurt through my lifetime.*

*(Enter Heracles from the side.)*

HERACLES

My friends, people of Pherae and the villages  
hereby, tell me, shall I find Admetus at home?

CHORUS LEADER

Yes, Heracles, the son of Pheres is in the house.  
But tell us, what is the errand that brings you here  
480      to the land of Thessaly and this city of Pherae?

HERACLES

I have some work to do for Eurystheus  
of Tiryns.

CHORUS LEADER

Where does it take you? On what far  
journey?

HERACLES

To Thrace, to take home Diomedes' chariot.

CHORUS LEADER

How can you? Do you know the man you are to meet?

HERACLES

485 No. I have never been where the Bistones live.

CHORUS LEADER

You cannot master his horses. Not without a fight.

HERACLES

It is my work, and I cannot refuse.

CHORUS LEADER

You must  
kill him before you come back; or be killed and stay.

HERACLES

If I must fight, it will not be for the first time.

CHORUS LEADER

490 What good will it do you if you overpower their master?

HERACLES

I will take the horses home to Tiryns and its king.

CHORUS LEADER

It is not easy to put a bridle on their jaws.

HERACLES

Easy enough, unless their nostrils are snorting fire.

CHORUS LEADER

Not that, but they have teeth that tear a man apart.

HERACLES

495 Oh no! Mountain beasts, not horses, feed like that.

CHORUS LEADER

But you can see their mangers. They are caked with blood.

HERACLES

And the man who raises them? Whose son does he claim to be?

CHORUS LEADER

Ares'. And he is lord of the golden shield of Thrace.

HERACLES

It sounds like my life and the kind of work I do.

500 It is a hard and steep way always that I go,  
having to fight one after another all the sons  
the war god ever got him, with Lycaon first,  
again with Cynus, and now here is a third fight  
that I must have with the master of these horses. So—  
505 I am Alcmene's son, and the man does not live  
who will see me break before my enemy's attack.

CHORUS LEADER

Here is the monarch of our country  
coming

from the house himself,



Admetus.

*(Enter Admetus from the house.)*

ADMETUS

Welcome and happiness  
to you, O scion of Perseus' blood and child of Zeus.

HERACLES

510 Happiness to you likewise, lord of Thessaly, Admetus.

ADMETUS

I could wish it. I know you mean  
well.

HERACLES

What is the matter? Why is there mourning and cut hair?

ADMETUS

There is one dead here whom I must bury today.

HERACLES

Not one of your children! I pray some god shield them from that.

ADMETUS

515 Not they. My children are well and living in their house.

HERACLES

If it is your father who is gone, his time was ripe.

ADMETUS

No, he is still there, Heracles. My mother, too.

HERACLES

Surely you have not lost your wife, Alcestis.

ADMETUS

Yes  
and no. There are two ways that I could answer that.

HERACLES

520 Did you say that she is dead or that she is still alive?

ADMETUS

She is, and she is no longer. It pains me.

HERACLES

I still do not know what you mean. You are being obscure.

ADMETUS

You know about her and what must happen, do you not?

HERACLES

I know that she has undertaken to die for you.

ADMETUS

525 How can she still be alive, then, when she has promised that?

HERACLES

Ah, do not mourn her before she dies. Wait for the time.

ADMETUS

The point of death is death, and the dead are lost and gone.

HERACLES

Being and nonbeing are considered different things.

ADMETUS

That is your opinion, Heracles. It is not mine.

HERACLES

530 Well, but whose is the mourning now? Is it in the family?

ADMETUS

A woman. We were speaking of a woman, were we not?

HERACLES

Was she a blood relative or someone from outside?

ADMETUS

No relation by blood, but she meant much to us.

HERACLES

How does it happen that she died here in your house?

ADMETUS

535 She lost her father and came here to live with us.

HERACLES

I am sorry,  
Admetus. I wish I had found you in a happier state.

ADMETUS

Why do you say that? What do you mean to do?

HERACLES

I mean  
to go on, and stay with another of my friends.

ADMETUS

No, my lord, no. The evil must not come to that.

HERACLES

540 The friend who stays with friends in mourning is in the way.

ADMETUS

The dead are dead. Go on in.

HERACLES

No. It is always wrong  
for guests to revel in a house where others mourn.

ADMETUS

There are separate guest chambers. We will take you there.

HERACLES

Let me go, and I will thank you a thousand times.

ADMETUS

545 You shall not go to stay with any other man.  
You there: open the guest rooms which are across the court  
from the house, and tell the people who are there to provide  
plenty to eat, and make sure that you close the doors  
facing the inside court. It is not right for guests  
550 to have their pleasures interrupted by sounds of grief.

*(Heracles is escorted into the house.)*

CHORUS LEADER

Admetus, are you crazy? What are you thinking of  
to entertain guests in a situation like this?

ADMETUS

And if I had driven from my city and my house  
the guest and friend who came to me, would you have approved  
555 of me more? Wrong. My misery would still have been  
as great, and I should be inhospitable too,  
and there would be one more misfortune added to those  
I have, if my house is called unfriendly to its friends.  
For this man is my best friend, and he is my host  
560 whenever I go to Argos, which is a thirsty place.

CHORUS LEADER

Yes, but then why did you hide what is happening here  
if this visitor is, as you say, your best friend?

ADMETUS

He would not have been willing to come inside my house  
if he had known what trouble I was in. I know.  
565 There are some will think I show no sense in doing this.  
They will not like it. But my house does not know how  
to push its friends away and not treat them as it should.

*(Exit into the house.)*

CHORUS [*singing*]

STROPHE A

*O liberal and forever free-handed house of this man,  
570 the Pythian himself, lyric Apollo,  
was pleased to live with you  
and had patience upon your lands  
to work as a shepherd,  
575 and on the hill-folds and the slopes  
piped to the pasturing of your flocks*

*in their season of mating.*

ANTISTROPHE A

*And even dappled lynxes for delight in his melody  
580 joined him as shepherds. From the cleft of Othrys descended  
a red troop of lions,  
and there, Phoebus, to your lyre's strain  
there danced the bright-coated  
585 fawn, adventuring from the deep  
bearded pines, light-footed for joy  
in your song, in its kindness.*

STROPHE B

*Therefore, your house is beyond  
all others for wealth of flocks by the sweet waters  
590 of Lake Boebias. For spread of cornland  
and pasturing range its boundary stands  
only there where the sun  
stalls his horses in dark air by the Molossians.  
595 Eastward he sways all to the harborless  
Pelian coast on the Aegean main.*

ANTISTROPHE B

*Now he has spread wide his doors  
and taken the guest in, when his eyes were wet  
and he wept still for a beloved wife who died  
600 in the house so lately. The noble strain  
comes out, in respect for others.  
All is there in the noble. I stand  
in awe at his wisdom, <sup>o</sup> and good hope has come again to my heart  
605 that for this godly man the end will be good.*

*(Enter Admetus from the house, followed by  
servants with a covered litter.)*

ADMETUS

Gentlemen of Pherae, I am grateful for your company.  
My men are bearing to the burning place and grave  
our dead, who now has all the state which is her due.  
Will you then, as the custom is among us, say  
610 farewell to the dead as she goes forth for the last time?

CHORUS LEADER

Yes, but I see your father coming now. He walks  
as old men do, and followers carry in their hands  
gifts for your wife, to adorn her in the underworld.

*(Enter Pheres from the side.)*

PHERES

I have come to bear your sorrows with you, son. I know,  
615 nobody will dispute it, you have lost a wife  
both good and modest in her ways. Nevertheless,  
you have to bear it, even though it is hard to bear.  
Accept these gifts to deck her body, bury them  
with her. Oh yes, she well deserves honor in death.  
620 She died to save your life, my son. She would not let  
me be a childless old man, would not let me waste  
away in sorrowful age deprived of you. Thereby,  
daring this generous action, she has made the life  
of all women become a thing of better repute  
than it was.

625 O you who saved him, you who  
raised us up

when we were fallen, farewell, even in Hades' house  
may good befall you.

I say people ought to marry women  
like this. Otherwise, better not to marry at all.

ADMETUS

I never invited you to come and see her buried,  
630 nor do I count your company as that of a friend.  
She shall not wear anything that you bring her.  
She needs nothing from you to be buried in. Your time  
to share my sorrow was when I was about to die.  
But you stood out of the way and let youth take my place  
635 in death, though you were old. Will you cry for her now?  
It cannot be that my body ever came from you,  
nor did the woman who claims she bore me and is called  
my mother give me birth. I was got from some slave  
and surreptitiously put to your wife to nurse.  
640 You show it. Your nature in the crisis has come out.  
I do not count myself as any child of yours.  
Oh, you outpass the cowardice of all the world,  
you at your age, come to the very last step of life  
and would not, dared not, die for your own child. Oh no,  
645 you let this woman, married into our family,  
do it instead, and therefore it is right for me  
to call her all the father and mother that I have.  
And yet you two should honorably have striven for  
the right of dying for your child. The time of life  
650 you had left for your living was short, in any case,  
and she and I would still be living out our time<sup>o</sup>  
and I should not be hurt and grieving over her.  
And yet, all that a man could have to bless his life



you have had. You had your youth in kingship. There was I  
655 your son, ready to take it over, keep your house  
in order, so you had no childless death to fear,  
with the house left to be torn apart by other claims.  
You cannot justify your leaving me to death  
on grounds that I disrespected your old age. Always I  
660 showed all consideration. See what thanks I get  
from you and from the woman who gave me birth. Go on,  
get you other children—you cannot do it too soon—  
who will look after your old age, and lay you out  
when you are dead, and see you buried properly.  
665 I will not do it. This hand will never bury you.  
I am dead as far as you are concerned, and if, because  
I found another savior, I still look on the sun,  
I count myself that person's child and fond support.  
It is meaningless, the way the old men pray for death  
670 and complain of age and the long time they have to live.  
Let death only come close, not one of them still wants  
to die. Their age is not a burden any more.

CHORUS LEADER

Stop, stop. We have trouble enough already, child.  
You will exasperate your father with this talk.

PHERES

675 Big words, son. Who do you think you are cursing out  
like this? Some Lydian slave, some Phrygian that you bought?  
I am a free Thessalian noble, nobly born  
from a Thessalian. Are you forgetting that? You go  
too far with your high-handedness. You volley brash  
680 words at me, and fail to hit me, and then run away.

I gave you life, and made you master of my house,  
and raised you. I am not obliged to die for you.  
I do not acknowledge any tradition among us  
that fathers should die for their sons. That is not Greek either.  
685 Your natural right is to find your own happiness  
or unhappiness. All you deserve from me, you have.  
You are lord of many. I have wide estates of land  
to leave you, just as my father left them to me.  
What harm have I done you then? What am I taking away  
690 from you? Do not die for me, I will not die for you.  
You like the sunlight. Don't you think your father does?  
I count the time I have to spend down there as long,  
and the time to live is little, but that little is sweet.  
You fought shamelessly for a way to escape death,  
695 and passed your proper moment, and are still alive  
because you killed her. Then, you wretch, you dare to call  
me coward, when you let your woman outdare you,  
and die for her magnificent young man? I see.  
You have found a clever scheme by which you *never* will die.  
700 You will always persuade the wife you have at the time  
to die for you instead. And you, so low, then dare  
blame your own people for not wanting to do this.  
Silence. I tell you, as you cherish your own life,  
all other people cherish theirs. And if you call  
705 us names, you will be called names, and the names are true.

CHORUS LEADER

Too much evil has been said in this speech and in  
that spoken before. Old sir, stop cursing your own son.

ADMETUS

No, speak, as I have spoken. ° If it hurts to hear  
the truth, you should not have made a mistake with me.

PHERES

710 I should have made a mistake if I had died for you.

ADMETUS

Is it the same thing to die old and to die young?

PHERES

Yes. We have only one life and not two to live.

ADMETUS

I think you would like to live a longer time than Zeus.

PHERES

Cursing your parents, when they have done you no wrong?

ADMETUS

715 Yes, for I found you much in love with a long life.

PHERES

Who is it you are burying? Did not someone die?

ADMETUS

And that she died, you foul wretch, proves your cowardice.

PHERES

You cannot say that we were involved in her death.

ADMETUS

Ah.

720 I hope that some day you will stand in need of me.

PHERES

Go on, and court more women, so they all can die.

ADMETUS

Your fault. You were not willing to die.

PHERES

No, I was not.

It is a sweet thing, this god's sunshine, sweet to see.

ADMETUS

That is an abject spirit, not a man's.

PHERES

You shall

not mock an old man while you carry out your dead.

ADMETUS

725 You will die in evil memory, when you do die.

PHERES

I do not care what they say of me when I am dead.

ADMETUS

How old age loses all the sense of shame.

PHERES

She was

not shameless, the woman you found; she was only stupid.

ADMETUS

Get out of here now and let me bury my dead.

PHERES

730 I'll go. You murdered her, and you can bury her.  
But you will have her brothers still to face. You'll pay,  
for Acastus is no longer counted as a man  
unless he sees you punished for his sister's blood.

ADMETUS

Go and be damned, you and that woman who lives with you.  
735 Grow old as you deserve, childless, although your son  
still lives. You shall not come again under the same roof  
with me. And if I had to proclaim by heralds that I  
disown my father's house, I should have so proclaimed.

*(Exit Pheres to the side.)*

Now we, for we must bear the sorrow that is ours,  
740 shall go, and lay her body on the burning place.

CHORUS [*chanting*]

*Ah, cruel the price of your daring,  
O generous one, O noble and brave,  
farewell. May Hermes of the world below  
and Hades welcome you. And if, even there,  
745 the good fare best, may you have high honor  
and sit by the bride of Hades.*

*(Exit all to the side. The stage is empty. Enter a Servant from the house.)*

SERVANT

I have known all sorts of foreigners who have come in  
from all over the world here to Admetus' house,  
and I have served them dinner, but I never yet

750 have had a guest as bad as this to entertain.  
In the first place, he could see the master was in mourning,  
but inconsiderately came in anyway.  
Then, he refused to understand the situation  
and be content with anything we could provide,  
755 but when we failed to bring him something, demanded it,  
and took a cup with ivy on it in both hands  
and drank the wine of our dark mother, straight, until  
the flame of the wine went all through him, and heated him,  
and then he wreathed branches of myrtle on his head  
760 and howled, off-key. There were two kinds of music now  
to hear, for while he sang and never gave a thought  
to the sorrows of Admetus' house, we servants were mourning  
our mistress; but we could not show before our guest  
with our eyes wet. Admetus had forbidden that.  
765 So now I have to entertain this guest inside,  
this ruffian thief, this highwayman, whoever he is,  
while she is gone away from the house, and I could not  
say good-bye, stretch my hand out to her in my grief  
for a mistress who was like a mother to all the house  
770 and me. She gentled her husband's rages, saved us all  
from trouble after trouble. Am I not then right  
to hate this guest who has come here in our miseries?

*(Enter Heracles from the house, drunk.)*

HERACLES

You there, with the sad and melancholy face, what is  
the matter with you? The servant who looks after guests  
775 should be polite and cheerful and not scowl at them.  
But look at you. Here comes your master's dearest friend

to visit you, and you receive him with black looks  
and frowns, all because of trouble in someone else's family.  
Come here, I'll tell you something that will make you wiser.  
780 Do you really know what life is like, the way it is?  
I don't think so. How could you? Well then, listen to me.  
Death is an obligation that we all must pay.  
There is not one man living who can truly say  
if he will be alive or dead on the next day.  
785 Fortune is dark; she moves, but we cannot see the way  
nor can we pin her down by expertise and study her.  
There, I have told you. Now you can understand. Go on,  
enjoy yourself, drink, call the life you live today  
your own, but only that; the rest belongs to chance.  
790 Then, beyond all gods, pay your best attentions to  
Cypris, man's sweetest. There's a god who's kind.  
Let everything else go and do as I prescribe  
for you, that is, if I seem to talk sense. Do I?  
I think so. Well, then, get rid of this too-much grief,  
795 put flowers on your head and drink with us, fight down  
these present troubles;° later, I know very well  
that the wine splashing in the bowl will shake you loose  
from these scowl-faced looks and the tension in your mind.  
We are only human. Our thoughts should be human too,  
800 since, for these solemn people and these people who scowl,  
the whole parcel of them, if I am any judge,  
life is not really life but a catastrophe.

SERVANT

I know all that. But we have troubles on our hands  
now that make revelry and laughter out of place.

HERACLES

805     The dead woman is out of the family. Do not mourn  
          too hard. Your master and mistress are still alive.

SERVANT

          What do you mean, alive? Don't you know what happened to us?

HERACLES

          Certainly, unless your master has lied to me.

SERVANT

          He is too hospitable, too much.

HERACLES

                                  Should I not then  
810     have enjoyed myself, because some outside woman was dead?

SERVANT

          She was an outsider indeed. That is too true.

HERACLES

          Has something happened that he did not tell me about?

SERVANT

          Never mind. Go. Our masters' sorrows are our own.

HERACLES

          These can be no outsiders' troubles.

SERVANT

                                  If they were,  
815     I should not have minded seeing you enjoy yourself.



HERACLES

Have I been scandalously misled by my own friends?

SERVANT

You came here when we were not  
prepared to take in guests.

You see, we are in mourning.

You can see our robes<sup>o</sup>  
of black, and how our hair is  
cut short.

HERACLES

Who is dead?

820 The aged father? Or is one of the children gone?

SERVANT

My lord, Admetus' wife is dead.

HERACLES

What are you saying?

And all this time you were making me comfortable?

SERVANT

He was embarrassed to turn you from this house of his.

HERACLES

My poor Admetus, what a helpmeet you have lost!

SERVANT

825 We are all dead and done for now, not only she.

HERACLES

I really knew it when I saw the tears in his eyes,

his shorn hair and his face; but he persuaded me  
with talk of burying someone who was not by blood  
related. So, unwillingly, I came inside  
830 and drank here in the house of this hospitable man  
when he was in this trouble! Worse, I wreathed my head  
with garlands, and drank freely. But you might have said  
something about this great disaster in the house.  
Now, where shall I find her? Where is the funeral being held?

SERVANT

835 Go straight along the Larisa road, and when you clear  
the city you will see the monument and the mound.

*(Exit the Servant into the house.)*

HERACLES

O heart of mine and hand of  
mine, who have endured  
so much already, prove what  
kind of son it was  
Alcmene, daughter of Electryon,  
bore to Zeus  
840 in Tiryns. I must save this  
woman who has died  
so lately, bring Alcestis back to  
live in this house,  
and pay Admetus all the  
kindness that I owe.  
I must go there and watch for  
Death of the black robes,  
master of dead men, and I think I  
shall find him  
845 drinking the blood of

slaughtered beasts beside the  
grave.

Then, if I can break suddenly  
from my hiding place,  
catch him, and hold him in the  
circle of these arms,  
there is no one who will be able  
to break my hold  
on his bruised ribs, until he gives  
the woman up  
850 to me. But if I miss my quarry, if  
he does not come  
to the bloody offering, I will go  
down, I will ask  
the Maiden and the Master in the  
sunless homes  
of those below; and I have  
confidence I shall bring  
Alcestis back up, and give her to  
the arms of my friend  
855 who did not drive me off but  
took me into his house  
and, though he staggered under  
the stroke of circumstance,  
hid it, for he was noble and  
respected me.  
Who in all Thessaly is a truer  
friend than this?  
Who in all Greece? Therefore, he  
must not ever say  
860 that, being noble, he befriended a  
worthless man.

*(Exit Heracles to the side. Then enter Admetus from the side, accompanied by the Chorus.)*

ADMETUS [*chanting*]

*Hateful is this  
return, hateful the sight of this house  
widowed, empty. Where shall I go?  
Where shall I stay? What shall I say?  
How can I die?*

865 *My mother bore me to a heavy fate.  
I envy the dead. I long for those  
who are gone, to live in their houses, with them.  
There is no pleasure in the sunshine  
nor the feel of the hard earth under my feet.*  
870 *Such was the hostage Death has taken  
from me, and given to Hades.*

*(While the Chorus sings, Admetus moans inarticulately.)*

CHORUS

STROPHE A

*Go on, go on. Plunge in the deep of the house.  
What you have suffered is enough for tears.  
You have gone through pain, I know,  
875 but you do no good to the woman who lies  
below. Never again to look on the face  
of the wife you loved hurts you.*

ADMETUS [*now chanting*]

*You have opened the wound torn in my heart.  
What can be worse for a man than to lose*

880     *a faithful wife. I envy those  
without wives, without children. I wish I had not  
ever married her, lived with her in this house.  
We have each one life. To grieve for this  
is burden enough.*

885     *When we could live single all our days  
without children, it is not to be endured  
to see children sicken or married love  
despoiled by death.*

*(As before: while the Chorus sings, Admetus moans inarticulately.)*

CHORUS

ANTISTROPHE A

*Chance comes. It is hard to wrestle against it.*

890     *There is no limit to set on your pain.  
The weight is heavy. Yet still  
bear up. You are not the first man to lose  
his wife. Disaster appears, to crush  
one man now, but afterward another.*

ADMETUS [*chanting*]

895     *How long my sorrows, the pain for my loves  
down under the earth.  
Why did you stop me from throwing myself  
in the hollow cut of the grave, there to lie  
dead beside her, who was best on earth?*

900     *Then Hades would have held fast two lives,  
not one, and the truest of all, who crossed  
the lake of the dead together.*

CHORUS [*singing*]

STROPHE B

*There was a man  
of my people, who lost a boy  
905 in his house anyone would mourn for,  
the only child. But still  
he bore the evil well enough, though childless,  
and he stricken with age  
and the hair gray on him,  
910 well on in his lifetime.*

ADMETUS [*chanting*]

*O builded house, how shall I enter you?  
How dwell in you, with this new turn  
of my fortune? How different now and then.  
915 Then it was with Pelian pine torches,  
with marriage songs, that I entered my house,  
with the hand of a sweet bride on my arm,  
with loud rout of revelers following  
to bless her who now is dead, and me,  
920 for our high birth, for nobilities  
from either side which were joined in us.  
Now the bridal chorus has changed for a dirge,  
and for white robes the costumed black  
goes with me inside  
925 to where our room stands deserted.*

CHORUS [*singing*]

ANTISTROPHE B

*Your luck had been*

*good, so you were inexperienced when  
this grief came. Still you saved  
your own life and being.*

930 *Your wife is dead, your love forsaken.  
What is new in this? Before  
now death has parted  
many from their wives.*

ADMETUS [*now speaking*]

935 Friends, I believe my wife is happier than I  
although I know she does not seem to be. For her,  
there will be no more pain to touch her ever again.  
She has her glory and is free from much distress.  
But I, who should not be alive, who have passed by  
940 my moment, shall lead a sorry life. I see it now.  
How can I bear to go inside this house again?  
Whom shall I speak to? Who will speak to me, to give  
me any pleasure in coming home? Where shall I turn?  
The desolation in my house will drive me out  
945 when I see my wife's bed empty, when I see the chairs  
she used to sit in, and all about the house the floor  
unwashed and dirty, while the children at my knees  
huddle and cry for their mother and the servants mourn  
their mistress and remember what the house has lost.  
950 So it will be at home, but if I go outside  
meeting my married friends in Thessaly, the sight  
of their wives will drive me back, for I cannot endure  
to look at my wife's age-mates and the friends of her youth.  
And anyone who hates me will say this of me:  
955 "Look at the man, disgracefully alive, who dared  
not die, but like a coward gave his wife instead

and so escaped death. Do you call him a man at all?  
He turns on his own parents, but he would not die  
himself.” Besides my other troubles, they will speak  
960 about me thus. What have I gained by living, friends,  
when reputation, life, and action all are bad?

CHORUS [*singing*]

STROPHE A

*I myself, in the transports  
of mystic verses, as in study  
of history and science, have found  
965 nothing so strong as Compulsion,  
nor any means to combat her,  
not in the Thracian books set down  
in verse by the voice of Orpheus,  
970 not in all the remedies Phoebus has given the heirs  
of Asclepius to fight the many afflictions of man.*

ANTISTROPHE A

*She alone is a goddess  
without altar or statue to pray  
975 before. She heeds no sacrifice.  
Majesty, bear no harder  
on me than you have in my life before!  
All Zeus himself ordains  
only with you is accomplished.  
980 By strength you fold and crumple the steel of the Chalybes.  
There is no pity in the sheer barrier of your will.*

STROPHE B



Now the goddess has caught you in the breakless grip of her hands.  
985 Bear up. You will never bring back up, by crying,  
the dead into the light again.  
Even the sons of the gods fade  
990 and go in death's shadow.  
She was loved when she was with us.  
She shall be loved still, now she is dead.  
It was the best of all women to whom you were joined in marriage.

ANTISTROPHE B

995 The monument of your wife must not be counted among the graves  
of the dead, but it must be given honors  
like the gods' worship of wayfarers.  
1000 And as they turn the bend of the road  
and see it, men shall say:  
"She died for the sake of her husband.  
Now she is a blessed spirit.  
1005 Hail, majesty, be gracious to us." Thus will men speak in her  
presence.

CHORUS LEADER

But here is someone who looks like Alcmene's son,  
Admetus. He seems on his way to visit you.

*(Enter Heracles from the side, leading a veiled woman.)*

HERACLES

A man, Admetus, should be allowed to speak freely  
to a friend, instead of keeping his complaints suppressed  
1010 inside him. Now, I thought I had the right to stand  
beside you and endure what you endured, so prove  
my friendship. But you never told me that she, who lay

dead, was your wife, but entertained me in your house  
as if your mourning were for some outsider's death.  
1015 And so I wreathed my head and poured libations out  
to the gods, in your house, though your house had suffered so.  
This was wrong, wrong I tell you, to have treated me  
thus, though I have no wish to hurt you in your grief.  
Now, as for the matter of why I have come back again,  
1020 I will tell you. Take this woman, keep her safe for me,  
until I have killed the master of the Bistones  
and come back, bringing with me the horses of Thrace.  
If I have bad luck—I hope not, I hope to come  
back home—I give her to the service of your house.  
1025 It cost a struggle for her to come into my hands.  
You see, I came on people who were holding games  
for all comers, with prizes which an athlete might  
well spend an effort winning.

*(Points to the woman.)*

Here is the prize I won  
and bring you. For the winners in the minor events  
1030 were given horses to take away, while those who won  
the heavier stuff, boxing and wrestling, got oxen,  
and a woman was thrown in with them. Since I happened  
to be there, it seemed wrong to let this splendid prize  
go by. As I said, the woman is for you to keep.  
1035 She is not stolen. It cost me hard work to bring  
her here. Some day, perhaps, you will say I have done well.

ADMETUS

I did not mean to dishonor nor belittle you  
when I concealed the fate of my unhappy wife,

but it would have added pain to pain already there  
1040 if you had been driven to shelter with some other host.  
This sorrow is mine. It is enough for me to weep.  
As for the woman, if it can be done, my lord,  
I beg you, have some other Thessalian, who has not  
suffered as I have, keep her. You have many friends  
1045 in Pherae. Do not bring my sorrows back to me.  
I would not have strength to see her in my house and keep  
my eyes dry. I suffer now. Do not inflict further  
suffering on me. I have sorrow enough to weigh me down.  
And where could a young woman live in this house? For  
1050 she is young, I can see it in her dress, her style.  
Am I to put her in the same quarters with the men?  
And how, circulating among young men, shall she be kept  
from harm? Not easy, Heracles, to hold in check  
a young strong man. I am thinking of your interests.  
1055 Or shall I put her in my lost wife's chamber, keep  
her there? How can I take her to Alcestis' bed?  
I fear blame from two quarters, from my countrymen  
who might accuse me of betraying her who helped  
me most, by running to the bed of another girl,  
1060 and from the dead herself. Her honor has its claim  
on me. I must be very careful. You, lady,  
whoever you are, I tell you that you have the same  
form as my Alcestis; all your body is like hers.  
Too much. Oh, by the gods, take this woman away  
1065 out of my sight. I am beaten already, do not beat  
me again. For as I look on her, I think I see  
my wife. It churns my heart to tumult, and the tears  
break streaming from my eyes. How much must I endure

the bitter taste of sorrow which is still so fresh?

CHORUS LEADER

1070 I cannot put a good name to your fortune; yet  
whoever you are, you must endure what the god gives.

HERACLES

I only wish that my strength had been great enough  
for me to bring your wife back from the chambered deep  
into the light. I would have done that grace for you.

ADMETUS

1075 I know you would have wanted to. Why speak of it?  
There is no way for the dead to come back to the light.

HERACLES

Then do not push your sorrow. Bear it as you must.

ADMETUS

Easier to comfort than to suffer and be strong.

HERACLES

But if you wish to mourn forever, what will you gain?

ADMETUS

1080 Nothing. I know it. But some impulse of my love  
makes me.

HERACLES

Why, surely. Love for the dead is  
cause for tears.

ADMETUS

Her death destroyed me, even more than I can say.

HERACLES

You have lost a fine wife. Who will say you have not?

ADMETUS

So fine  
that I, whom you see, never shall enjoy life again.

HERACLES

1085 Time will soften the evil. It still is young and strong.

ADMETUS

You can say time will soften it, if time means death.

HERACLES

A wife, your new marriage will put an end to this desire.

ADMETUS

Silence! I never thought you would say a thing like that.

HERACLES

What? You will not remarry but keep an empty bed?

ADMETUS

1090 No woman ever shall sleep in my arms again.

HERACLES

Do you believe you help the dead by doing this?

ADMETUS

Wherever she may be, she deserves my honors still.

HERACLES

Praiseworthy, yes, praiseworthy. And yet foolish, too.

ADMETUS

Call me so, then, but never call me a bridegroom.

HERACLES

1095 I admire you for your faith and love you bear your wife.

ADMETUS

Let me die if I betray her, though she is gone.

HERACLES

Well then,  
receive this woman into your most generous house.

ADMETUS

Please, in the name of Zeus your father, no!

HERACLES

And yet  
you will be making a mistake if you do not.

ADMETUS

1100 And I'll be eaten at the heart with anguish if I do.

HERACLES

Obey. The grace of this may come where you need grace.

ADMETUS

Ah.  
I wish you had never won her in those games of yours.

HERACLES

Where I am winner, you are winner along with me.

ADMETUS

Honorably said. But let the woman go away.

HERACLES

1105 She will go, if she should. First look. See if she should.

ADMETUS

She should, unless it means you will be angry with me.

HERACLES

Something I know of makes me so insistent with you.

ADMETUS

So, win again. But what you do does not please me.

HERACLES

The time will come when you will thank me. Only obey.

*(To attendants.)*

ADMETUS

1110 Escort her in, if she must be taken into this house.

HERACLES

I will not hand this lady over to attendants.

ADMETUS

You yourself lead her into the house then, if you wish.

HERACLES

I will put her into your hands and into yours alone.

ADMETUS

I will not touch her. But she is free to come inside.

HERACLES

1115 No, I have faith in your right hand, and only yours.

ADMETUS

My lord, you are forcing me to act against my wish.

HERACLES

Be brave. Reach out your hand and touch the stranger.

ADMETUS

So.

Here is my hand; I feel like Perseus killing the Gorgon.

HERACLES

You have her?

ADMETUS

Yes, I have her.

HERACLES

1120 Keep her, then. Some day  
you will say the son of Zeus came as your generous guest.  
But look at her. See if she does not seem most like  
your wife. Your grief is over now. Your luck is back.

ADMETUS

Gods, what shall I think! Amazement beyond hope, as I  
look on this woman, this wife. Is she really mine,



1125 or some sweet mockery for a god to stun me with?

HERACLES

Not so. This is your own wife you see. She is here.

ADMETUS

Be careful she is not some phantom from the depths.

HERACLES

The guest and friend you took was no necromancer.

ADMETUS

Do I see my wife, whom I was laying in the grave?

HERACLES

1130 Surely. But I do not wonder at your unbelief.

ADMETUS

May I touch her, and speak to her, as my living wife?

HERACLES

Speak to her. All that you desired is yours.

ADMETUS

Oh, eyes  
and body of my dearest wife, I have you now  
beyond all hope. I never thought I'd see you again.

HERACLES

1135 You have her. May no god begrudge you your happiness.

ADMETUS

O nobly sprung child of all-highest Zeus, may good

fortune go with you. May the father who gave you birth  
keep you safe. You alone raised me up when I was down.  
How did you bring her back from down there to the light?

HERACLES

1140 I fought a certain deity who had charge of her.

ADMETUS

Where do you say you fought this match with Death?

HERACLES

Beside  
the tomb itself. I ambushed him and caught him in my hands.

ADMETUS

But why is my wife standing here, and does not speak?

HERACLES

You are not allowed to hear her speak to you until  
1145 her obligations to the gods who live below  
are washed away and the third morning comes. So now  
take her and lead her inside, and for the rest of time,  
Admetus, be just: treat your guests as they deserve.  
And now good-bye. I have my work that I must do,  
1150 and go to face the lordly son of Sthenelus.

ADMETUS

No, stay with us and be the guest of our hearth.

HERACLES

There still  
will be a time for that, but I must press on now.

ADMETUS

Success go with you. May you find your way back here.

*(Exit Heracles to the side.)*

I proclaim to all the people of my tetrarchy  
that, for these blessed happenings, they shall set up  
1155 dances, and the altars smoke with sacrifice offered.  
For now we shall make our life again, and it will be  
a better one.

I was lucky. That I cannot deny.

*(Exit with Alcestis into the house.)*

CHORUS [*chanting*]

*Many are the forms of what is divine.*  
1160 *Much that the gods achieve is surprise.*  
*What we look for does not come to pass;*  
*a god finds a way for what none foresaw.*  
*Such was the end of this story.*

*(Exit all.)*