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Greece & Rome, Vol. 50, No. 1, April 2003

ALCESTIS: EURIPIDES TO TED HUGHES

By L. P. E. PARKER

The woman who died to save her husband has proved to have a hold on the imagination almost as strong as the man who killed his father and married his mother. Herbert Hunger[1] lists twenty-four plays and twenty-three operas on the story of Alcestis, and his list is by no means complete. The following study is far from comprehensive: I attempt only to examine a selection of treatments of the theme. But the author's engagement with his chosen story is far more intimate, far more intense than that of the critic, the audience, or even the theatrical director. So the choices of poets and playwrights over the centuries cast a powerful, oblique light on Euripides' enigmatic text, as well as revealing a diversity of approaches which students of the Greek play would hardly expect.

The story that Euripides dramatized in Alcestis has its origins in folk-tale, and versions of it have been collected from the Balkans in the west to India in the east.[2] Essentially, a young man is suddenly threatened with death on his wedding day, with the proviso that he can be saved if someone else will willingly give his or her life, or part of it, to save him. His parents refuse; only his bride accepts. She does not, however, die at once. Either she gives only half her remaining years, or, if she simply agrees to die, the divine powers are moved to pity and spare both her and the bridegroom. So the marriage takes place and the future of the family is secured. In Euripides' version, the threat to Admetus comes, not on his wedding-day,[3] but at some later, unspecified time. But, for his

[1] *Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie* (Vienna, 1969), 23–6. A glaring omission is Browning's *Balaustion's Adventure* (see below, 18–22). For comparison, he lists 41 plays about Oedipus and 13 operas; for Orpheus, 19 plays and 25 operas. Only Orpheus among figures in Greek mythology has generated more operas than Alcestis, and for that there is an obvious reason. Henri Patin, *Études sur les tragiques grecs. Euripide I* (Paris, 1858), 222–40, discusses a number of versions, including some unknown to Hunger. Kurt von Fritz, in 'Euripides' "Alkestis" und ihre modernen Nachahmer und Kritiker', in *Antike und moderne Tragödie* (Berlin, 1962), 256–321 = *A&A* 5 [1956], 27–69, discusses a selection of versions, with particular attention to Wieland (see below, 12–14) and Browning.

[2] Albin Lesky's monograph, 'Alkestis. Der Mythus und das Drama' (*Akad. Wiss. in Wien. Phil. hist Kl. Sitzber.* 203 [Vienna, 1925]) is a work of prime importance, but some of the tales he discusses are only rather tenuously related to the Alcestis-myth. A fuller collection is provided by G. Megas, 'Die Sage von Alkestis', *Archiv für Religionswiss.* 30 (1933), 1–33.

[3] No ancient version of the story explicitly connects the threat to Admetus' life with his wedding.

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own reasons, Euripides retains the time-lag between Alcestis' offer to die and her actual death. He also retains, although he does not actually dramatize, Admetus' personal search for a substitute:[4]

> Having gone round asking all those near and dear to him – his old father and the mother who bore him – he found no-one but his wife who was willing to die for him and see the light of day no more.

In the folk-take versions, however, there is no heroic rescuer, no Heracles, to bring back the heroine from the dead.[5] If she returns, it is because her sacrifice is refused by the divine powers, and that, indeed, is Plato's version of the story of Alcestis (*Symp.* 129 b–d).

Surprisingly, perhaps, in view of its later history, the tale of Alcestis and Admetus does not seem to have appealed to Attic dramatists. We hear of a play of indeterminate genre by Phrynichus, possibly a satyr-play by Sophocles and several comedies.[6] Euripides' play, too, includes a distinct element of comedy, while remaining profoundly moving, troubling and problematic.[7]

For the Romans, the uncomplicated, conjugal love of Alcestis seems to have had even less appeal. References to Euripides' play have been seen in Dido's farewell to the bed she had shared with Aeneas (*Aen.* 6.648ff.) and the consecration to Dis of a lock of her hair (*Aen.* 6.700–5). The first passage, however, has more in common with the account of the death of Deianira at *Trach.* 912ff.[8] An *Alcestis* figures among the tragedies of Accius and among the titles of poems by Laevius.[9] Ovid

Apollodorus (1.9.15), writing several centuries after Euripides, recounts that Admetus forgot to sacrifice to Artemis and found the bridal chamber full of snakes. The story of Apollo's bargain with the Fates follows immediately in Apollodorus' narrative, but no connection is made between the two events.

[4] *Alc.* 15–20. 16 has aroused suspicion, but see A. M. Dale, *Euripides. Alcestis* (Oxford, 1954), ad loc.

[5] The introduction of Heracles into the story may be literary in origin. See Dale (n. 4), xi–xiv.

[6] For Phrynichus, see *TrGF I*, pp. 69, 73; for Sophocles, *TrGF IV*, fr. 851; for comedies, Antiphanes, *PCG II.* Testimonia 1, Aristomenes, *PCG II*, Testimonia 1 and *5, Theopompus, *PCG VII*, p. 709; for the Sicilian comedian, Phormos, *PCG I*, pp. 174–5.

[7] On the strength of a remark in the second hypothesis (τὸ δὲ δρᾶμά ἐστι σατυρικώτερον) and the absence otherwise of a satyr-play from the group of plays presented in 438, *Alcestis* is often described as 'pro-satyric'. Such significance as the term may have for the interpretation of the play is thoroughly discussed by Dale (n. 4), xviii–xxii. On the hypotheses, see also xxxviii–lv.

[8] The matter is complicated by the resemblance between the Nurse's account of Deianira's death at *Trach.* 899ff. and the maidservant's account of Alcestis' leave-taking at *Alc.* 152ff. See A. Lesky, 'Alkestis und Deianeira', in J. M. Bremer, S. L. Radt and C. J. Ruijgh (eds.), *Miscellanea Tragica in honorem J. C. Kamerbeek* (Amsterdam, 1976), 213–23.

[9] For Accius, see O. Ribbeck, *Scaenicae Romanorum Poesis Fragmenta. I Tragicorum Fragmenta* (Leipzig, ^{3}1897, repr. Hildesheim, 1962), p. 165, A. Klotz, *Scaenicorum Romanorum Fragmenta. I Tragicorum Fragmenta* (Munich, 1953), p. 200 and E. H. Warmington, *Remains of Old Latin II* (London and Cambridge MA, 1936), 20, p. 333. For Laevius, see W. Morel, *Fragmenta Poetarum Latinorum* (Stuttgart, ^{2}1975), 56–7.

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mentions her twice in poems addressed to his own wife. At *Pont.* 3.1.105 he pictures his wife, hypothetically, in the role of Alcestis (a possibility, it is fair to say, that he hastens to reject), then in that of Penelope. At *Trist.* 5.14.37 (the last poem of the work), he promises her immortality with other virtuous heroines, such as Penelope, Alcestis, Andromache, and Laodamia. Juvenal, at 6.652, speaks of women 'who watch Alcestis [on stage] meeting her husband's fate, but who, if a similar exchange were granted to them, would choose to save the life of their little dog in exchange for their husband's'. This does not go far as evidence that plays about Alcestis were much to be seen on the Roman stage. The type of performance referred to was most probably pantomime.[10] There are glancing references in Statius, *Silvae* 3.3.192–4 and 5.3.272, while in *Thebaid* 6.389–549 Admetus figures prominently in the chariot-race at the funeral games of Archemorus, and his length of life is mentioned at 380–1. Valerius Maximus comes nearer to actually telling the story than any other surviving Roman writer, and he does not come very near. At 4.6.1, he reproaches Admetus for allowing his wife to die in his place, and adds that he had also tested the affection of his parents. This is of some interest, since Valerius Maximus seems to have been a popular author in the Middle Ages and Renaissance.[11] But the mythographers and commentators, Fulgentius, Lactantius Placidus and, just possibly, Hyginus, who were really responsible for transmitting the story to pre-Renaissance Europe, all tell it in a form which conceals its moral ambiguities.[12]

Alcestis enters English literature with Chaucer's *Legend of Good*

[10] See J. Gérard, *Juvénal et la Réalité contemporaine* (Paris, 1976), 91–2, 97–8. Lucian (*De Saltatione* 52) mentions Alcestis among subjects for pantomime.

[11] 'For the medieval world thirty manuscripts are known to have been produced in the twelfth century or earlier. In the Renaissance they abounded, as did printed editions from 1470 on.' D. R. Shackleton Bailey, in *Valerius Maximus I* (Cambridge MA, 2000), Introduction, 4. According to J. Briscoe, *Valerii Maximi facta et dicta memorabilia* (Stuttgart and Leipzig, 1998), *Praefatio* vii, more than 80 MSS survive, including translations and commentaries.

[12] Fulgentius: Cumque in infirmitatem Admetus decidisset et mori se conperisset, Apollinem deprecatus est; ille vero dixit se ei aliquid [in infirmitate] non posse praestare, nisi si quis se de eius propinquis ad mortem pro eo voluntarie obtulisset. quod uxor efficit; itaque Hercules dum ad Tricerberum canem abstrahendum descenderet, etiam ipsam de inferis levat. R. Helm (ed.), *Fabii Planciadis Fulgentii V. C. Opera. Mitologiarum libri tres* (Leipzig, 1898), 1.22.

Lactantius (on Statius, *Theb.* 6.380–1): Beneficio enim uxoris Alcestae Admetus distulerat mortem. cuius talis est fabula: Alceste Admeti uxor fuit. haec, cum agnovisset viro suo finem propinquare vitae, sese obtulit morti. quam cum exstinctam Admetus impatienter doleret, Herculis laboribus ei reducta ab inferis dicitur. R. D. Sweeney (ed.) *Lactantius Placidus. In Statii Thebaida Commentum I* (Stuttgart and Leipzig, 1997), 413.

Hyginus: et illud ab Apolline accepit, ut pro se alius voluntarie moreretur. pro quo cum neque pater neque mater mori voluisset, uxor se Alcestis obtulit et pro eo vicaria morte interiit: quam postea Hercules ab inferis revocavit. P. K. Marshall (ed.), *Hygini Fabulae* (Stuttgart and Leipzig, 1993), 51.3. Hyginus is the only one of the three to mention the refusal of the parents. However, the

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Women, as a beautiful lady dressed all in green with a crown of pearls on her head, who comes to the poet in a dream, accompanying the god of love. The prologue exists in two versions. In the earlier, the lady is soon revealed as 'Alceste', foremost of women faithful in love, and the 'Balade' (203–23) has as its refrain: 'Alceste is here, that al that may desteyne'. In the later version, her identity is kept concealed until later in the poem, and the refrain begins: 'My lady cometh . . .' Alcestis leads another nineteen women faithful in love, whose stories are recounted. Hers was to have come last, but the poem is unfinished, and the god of love gives only a brief version in the prologue (498–504 = 510–16):

> Hastow nat in a book, lyth in thy cheste,
> The gret goodnesse of the quene Alceste,
> That turned was into a dayesye:
> She that for hir husbonde chees to dye,
> And eek to goon to helle, rather than he,
> And Ercules rescued hir, pardee,
> And broghte hir out of helle agayn to blis?

Alcestis' metamorphosis into a daisy ('day's eye'), whence her outfit, is a nice, Ovidian touch of Chaucer's own.

But what was the book in Chaucer's chest? His most likely source for the story is Boccaccio's *Genealogiae deorum gentilium*, where the rescue of Alcestis features among the Labours of Heracles.[13] Boccaccio's narrative runs as follows:

> He [Hercules] also brought Alcestis, wife of Admetus, King of Thessaly, back to her husband. For they say that when Admetus was ill and had implored the aid of Apollo, he was told by Apollo that he could not escape death unless someone from those near and dear to him would undergo it. When his wife, Alcestis, heard this, she had no hesitation in offering her life for her husband's, and so Admetus was freed by her death. But he, deeply grieved for his wife, begged Hercules that, going down to the underworld, he would bring her spirit back to the world above, which was indeed done.

In theory, Boccaccio could have had some knowledge of Euripides' play from one of the Hellenists he knew, in particular Leonzio Pilato, who

almost total absence of MSS of the *Fabulae* suggests that the work can hardly have been widely known before the publication of Micyllus' edition, printed in Basel in 1535, our earliest source for the complete text.

[13] *Genealogiae* 13, *prooemium*. Apollo's servitude to Admetus is mentioned briefly in 5, cap. 3. See W. W. Skeat (ed.), *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (Oxford, 1894), xxix, cf. B. Dillon, *A Chaucer Dictionary: Proper Names and Allusions* (Boston, 1975), 48. Skeat's other suggestion, Hyginus, is highly unlikely (see n.12, above), but Chaucer may have known Fulgentius. Alcestis is mentioned elsewhere in Chaucer at *Troilus and Criseyde* V. 1527, 1778, the Man of Law's Tale, i. 75, and the Franklin's Tale, 1442.

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translated part of *Hecuba* for him.[14] There is nothing, however, in the story as he tells it to prove that he knew anything of Euripides, and a certain amount to suggest that he did not. He could have derived his account entirely from Latin sources that were certainly known to him: Fulgentius and Lactantius Placidus.[15] Admetus' illness is a rationalization to be found in Fulgentius. In folktale versions, the threat of death comes with sinister, mysterious suddenness, and Euripides, still imaginatively in contact with folk-narrative, says nothing of illness.[16] Lactantius implies (*ab inferis*) and Fulgentius says explicitly that Heracles went down to the underworld to bring Alcestis back. Lactantius alone mentions Admetus' grief. Neither says anything of Admetus' parents and their unwillingness to sacrifice themselves. It is hard to believe that Boccaccio could have omitted them, had he known Euripides' play.[17]

Apart from the light it sheds on how the knowledge of Greek mythology reached medieval western Europe, the matter of Boccaccio's sources is interesting in that it reveals how a master of narrative selects from and shapes his material. Moreover, his version proves almost standard for the future: Admetus is ill; Alcestis learns that he can be saved by another's death; she offers her life without reference to him. Except for strict translators, the vast majority of writers who use the story conceive it in the same way, whether or not they have read Boccaccio, or Euripides, or each other.

Boccaccio is also the most probable source for Chaucer's contemporary, John Gower, who mentions the story twice in the *Confessio Amantis*. At VII. 1917–43, he recounts how 'Duk Ametus' is ill and facing imminent death. His wife, Alceste, prays and sacrifices to Minerva, until she hears a voice saying that if she herself will die, he can be saved. She accepts gratefully, returns to Admetus and embraces and kisses him. Thereupon, he recovers and she dies. The story is told again, very briefly, at VIII. 2640–6. There is no mention in either passage of a return from the dead.

Hans Sachs, the shoemaker-poet of Nuremberg, Wagner's hero in *Die Meistersinger*, offers a highly individual version of the story. His

[14] *Genealogiae* 15, cap. 6, Boccaccio mentions three Hellenists who had helped him in his studies: Barlaam, the orthodox churchman from Calabria, Paolo of Perugia, librarian to King Robert of Sicily, and Leonzio Pilato, 'Graecarum historiarum atque fabularum archivium inexhaustum'.

[15] Boccaccio's MS of Statius, with the commentary of Lactantius, with annotations in his own hand, survives in the Laurentian Library in Florence. See D. Anderson, *Boccaccio's Glosses on Statius = Studi sul Boccaccio XXII* (Florence, 1994). For Boccaccio's use of Fulgentius in the *Genealogiae*, see L. G. Whitbread, *Fulgentius the Mythographer* ([Columbus] Ohio, 1971), 36, n. 29.

[16] On folk-themes in Euripides, see S. Trenkner, *The Greek Novella* (Oxford, 1958), chap. IV.

[17] See above, n. 12.

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'Tragedia mit 7 personen', *Die getrew fraw Alcestis mit ihrem getrewen mann Admeto*, dates from 1550.[18] The action begins immediately after Pelias' daughters have been tricked by Medea into killing their father. His two sons decide that their sisters must die, but Alcestis flees to her husband Admeto, who hides her. The brothers' emissaries threaten to kill Admeto, unless he hands over his wife. Admeto refuses, but Alcestis offers herself in order to save him. Admeto insists that he would rather die, but eventually she is led away and he is left lamenting. There is no rescue. For all its simplicity, not to say naivety, Sachs's handling has significant merits. Given that Admetus is to be a noble character, fully worthy of Alcestis' sacrifice, it is as well that he should give some active proof of his nobility, rather than merely expostulating and lamenting. At the same time, Sachs maintains a balance, so that the husband's nobility does not eclipse that of the wife. Again, the competition in magnanimity between the two has potential for generating dramatic tension, and Sachs was the first, but not the last, writer to imagine it. This version of the story is not, however, his invention. In the prologue, he cites as his sources 'Ovidius und ander'. Ovid tells the story of the killing of Pelias at *Met.* 7. 294–349, but it has taken some ingenious literary detection by F. L. Wiener to identify 'ander'.[19] The story goes back to the late-fourth-century, rationalizing mythographer, Palaephatus. Sachs must have found it in a German translation of *De institutione foeminae Christianae* by the Spanish humanist, Juan Luis Vives. Palaephatus includes a version of the rescue of Alcestis by Heracles; Vives leaves it out. With Sachs, the life of this version comes to an end.

In contrast, Alexandre Hardy, whose 'Tragi-comedie', *Alceste ou la Fidelité* was published in 1602, not only includes Heracles, but gives him a truly major role. Juno speaks the prologue, and the whole first act is taken up with her command to Eurystheus that Heracles be sent to fetch Cerberus, and the transmission of that command to Heracles. The second act switches to Admete on his death-bed, with his father (unnamed), mother and wife lamenting. His parents both wish that

[18] For the text of Sachs's play, see A. von Keller (ed.), *Hans Sachs XII* (Tübingen, 1879), 387–403. Sachs's first attempt at drama on a classical theme, *Tragedia von der Lucretia*, dates back to 1527. Among his Greek subjects were Jocasta, Clytemnestra, Ulysses and Penelope, and the fall of Troy.

[19] 'Hans Sachs' Alcestis Drama and its Sources', *German Life and Letters* 6 (1952–3), 196–206. Vives' Latin work was first published in Antwerp in 1523, and the German translation by Bruno von Hyrtzweil in Augsburg in 1544. Sachs did also owe something to Boccaccio: his Acastus badly needs someone to talk to, and Boccaccio provides another son of Pelias called 'Agialeus', who makes his first appearance in the story of Medea as told in *De claris mulieribus*. For the text of Palaephatus, see N. Festa (ed.), *Mythographi Graeci* 3.2 (Leipzig, 1902), 60–2.

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they could die in his stead. One Euripile now arrives from the oracle of Delphi, with the news that Admete can be saved by the death of another. Admete himself rejects the bargain, but Euripile appeals to the parents to save so excellent a king. With the prospect of death really before them, both refuse. The father argues that his remaining span of life is too short to be of use to Admete. That is not what Apollo meant, says Euripile, but in vain. Alceste offers her life unasked. Admete tries to dissuade her, but without success. In Act III, Alceste is dead, and Hercule assures the sorrowing Admete that he happens to be going down to the underworld, and will bring her back. Act IV shows the terror of the inhabitants of the underworld at the irruption of Hercule. He captures Cerberus, frees Theseus and wins Alceste by negotiation, and in Act V the whole party present themselves to Admete. It is fortunate that Admete, preoccupied, one supposes, by his joy at the restoration of Alceste, does not notice the three-headed dog until halfway through the scene. The interlude in Hades is overtly burlesque, but there is a pantomimic quality about the whole play, which may or may not be deliberate.

Hardy could certainly have known Euripides' play, whether or not he knew Greek, for several Latin translations were available before the end of the sixteenth century.[20] He shows no sign, however, that he knew it, and the absence of Pheres' name suggests that he did not. All the essentials of his version are available from the Latin mythographers: Hyginus (by then in print) mentions the parents, and Fulgentius combines the rescue of Alcestis with the theft of Cerberus.[21] The setting of the whole story in the context of the Labours of Heracles suggests Boccaccio.

Lully's opera, *Alceste, ou le Triomphe d'Hercule*, with libretto by Philippe Quinault, first performed in the spring of 1674, moves even further, as the alternative title indicates, in the direction of making

[20] A version of all the plays (except *Electra*) was published in Basel in 1541. Greek texts with parallel Latin translations were published at Frankfurt and, again, Basel, both in 1562. Canter's edition with his parallel Latin translation was first published in 1571 in Antwerp and re-published in 1597, in Heidelberg, with the translation revised by Portus. Above all, George Buchanan's translation of *Alcestis* was published in 1556, but it had been written about 1540, when Buchanan was teaching at the Collège de Guyenne in Bordeaux. He may not have taught Montaigne, but the great essayist remembered acting in his plays: 'J'ai soustenu les premiers personnages ès tragedies latines de Bucanan . . . qui se representerent en nostre college de Guienne avec dignité.' *Essais I.* xxvi. Buchanan's translation was reprinted several times, and was still in use early in the nineteenth century. See now P. Sharratt and P. G. Walsh (eds.), *George Buchanan. Tragedies* (Edinburgh, 1983).

[21] See above, n. 12.

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Heracles the central figure.[22] The work sprang from Louis XIV's programme of creating a native opera to replace Italian opera on the French stage, and the essential feature of such performances was brilliant and opulent spectacle. In addition to Alcide (Heracles), Alceste, Admete and Pheres, the cast includes Licomede, King of Scyros, three confidants (who provide a romantic sub-plot), Cleante, squire of Admete, Thetis, Eole, Apollon, Diane, Mercure, Charon, Pluton, Proserpine, Alecton, four Aquilons, four Zephyrs, the nine Muses, choruses of Thessalians, of the peoples of all Greece, of sailors, soldiers, afflicted women, sorrowing men, shepherds and shepherdesses and herdsmen, with a further profusion of attendants, shades and allegorical personages. The action includes a storm at sea, the taking of a city by storm, and flight in a winged chariot. A major preoccupation of contemporary criticism seems to have been the visibility of the ropes working the stage machinery.[23]

The piece begins with Alcide, disconsolate at the wedding of Alceste, whom he loves, to Admete. Licomede also loves Alceste, and manages to carry her off by a ruse. Alcide and Admete together take Licomede's city by storm, but, at the moment of triumph, Admete is mortally wounded. Apollon appears in person to reveal that Admete can be saved only if someone else will die for him. Pheres (who earlier tottered on to the stage in arms to take part in the military action) refuses, using the same excuse as Hardy's anonymous father:

> Je n'ay plus qu'un reste de vie.
> Ce n'est rien pour Admete, et c'est beaucoup pour moi.

But Admete mysteriously recovers. Someone has died for him, but no-one knows who, until a vision of Alceste stabbing herself appears. Alcide announces that he will go down to Hades and fetch her back, on condition that Admete will then hand her over to him, for her death has cancelled out her marriage. Admete magnanimously agrees. He prefers that his beloved Alceste should live, even if she is no longer his. Alcide brings Alceste back, but, realizing that she has never loved anyone but Admete, he renounces his claim, and returns her to her husband. His final and greatest triumph is over himself. Quinault's awareness of Hardy's version and his determination to improve on it are both evident. In particular, Heracles is given the emotional connection

[22] For the text and the literary controversy to which it gave rise, see W. Brooks, B. Norman and J. M. Zarucchi (eds.), *Philippe Quinault. Alceste, suivi de la Querelle d'Alceste* (Geneva, 1994).
[23] See op. cit. n. 22, xi.

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with the plot that his prominence in it might be felt to require. In addition, Quinault not only converts the myth into a story of male magnanimity in which Alcestis' sacrifice becomes subsidiary, but suffuses the whole with an atmosphere of chivalric romance.

While the piece was a great success at court (with the support of the king, how could it have been otherwise?), the enthusiasm of the Parisian audience seems to have been no more than moderate. Charles Perrault, best known as recorder and shaper of some of our best-loved fairy-tales – *Cinderella*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, *Puss-in-Boots* – produced an anonymous defence against critics who had, it seems, accused the author of omitting the chief beauties of Euripides' play. The defence develops into a comprehensive attack on Euripides. The maidservant's account of Alcestis' farewell to her marriage-bed was acceptable, no doubt, to Euripides' contemporaries, but would be ridiculous and embarrassing to a modern audience. Then, there is the quarrel between Admetus and Pheres: 'la chose la plus odieuse qui ait jamais esté mise sur le Theâtre.'

Racine took on the defence of Euripides in the preface to *Iphigenie*. Perrault had supposed that the tastes of an ancient audience were different; on the contrary, says Racine, his own borrowings from Homer and Euripides have pleased the audiences of Paris: 'Le goust de Paris s'est trouvé conforme a celuy d'Athenes. Mes Spectateurs ont esté émus des mesmes choses qui ont mis autrefois en larmes le plus sçavant peuple de la Grece.' Perrault's reading was inattentive (he had taken Euripides' Alcestis to be middle-aged), and his text, in at least one place, defective. Shrewdly, Racine concentrates his attack on those points, rather than offering a comprehensive defence of Euripides. He says nothing of the Pheres-scene, but the death of Alcestis is 'une Scene merveilleuse'. The question of whether or not ancient taste differed from modern has proved to be perennial, and the idea that it did has been used both to attack Euripides and to defend him.

Joseph de Lagrange-Chancel, who had enjoyed the support of Racine in his débuts as a dramatist, published his *Alceste* in 1704, five years after Racine's death. He claimed to have incorporated ideas from a play which Racine had begun, but eventually thrown in the fire. Be that as it may, Lagrange-Chancel's treatment is exceptional in the prominence it gives to Pheres. Again, Hercule loves Alceste. He intends to marry her, but entrusts her to the care of Pheres, while he goes to destroy Troy. He is absent for eight years, and in the meantime, Admete and Alceste, who know nothing of Hercule's intentions, fall in love. Alceste is now the heiress of her brother, Acaste, and Pheres, thinking that Hercule will

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never return, succumbs to the temptation to let the young people marry. Now he has abdicated in favour of Admete, but an abyss pouring forth pestilential fumes and inhabited by a man-devouring monster has opened up in the city, and to save the citizens from a general plague, one citizen chosen by lot has from time to time to be sacrificed. Pheres alone knows that this is the punishment for his perfidy. Now Hercule returns, the truth is revealed, and Admete, distraught, rushes to immolate himself and save his subjects. He is overcome by fumes and at the point of death when it is revealed that another may die for him. Pheres and Alceste ask for volunteers, but, excellent king though he is, none of his subjects will die for Admete. Alone on stage, Pheres, after a struggle, decides to sacrifice himself, but Alceste has anticipated him. Now a servant recounts her last farewells, including that to her marriage-bed, which Racine had approved. Admete is bent on suicide. Hercule is summoned, but Admete cannot bear to face him: 'I took Alceste from him, and now I have caused her death'. But Hercule has already rescued Alceste on the verge of the abyss, slain the monster lurking in it, and brought her back.

This summary is far from doing justice to the twists and turns that Lagrange-Chancel manages to introduce into his plot. The audience is constantly led into wondering how the characters will react to events, but Pheres alone invites some complexity of response. In view of the love between Admete and Alceste, his breach of faith seems venial, and he watches the disastrous consequences with anguish and remorse:

> Grands Dieux, de notre sort arbitres souverains!
> Detournez sur moi seul tous les maux que je crains.

Moreover, although Admete and Alceste treat him with the utmost respect and solicitude, he suffers severely from the loss of status following his abdication:

> On me laisse, on me fuit. Je vois mes cheveux gris,
> Dans une jeune Cour, un sujet de mepris.

Thus, when he eventually decides to offer his life, he has had to overcome not only the fear of death, but the ignoble temptation to resume his kingship. Lagrange-Chancel has turned a story of self-sacrifice into one of crime and punishment, and Admetus and Alcestis are reduced to an equal, almost a secondary, role as innocent victims.

The influence of Euripides is more apparent in *Edward and Eleonora* by James Thomson, poet of *The Seasons*. This is paradoxical, since Thomson transfers the story to the epoch of the Crusades. He develops

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his plot from an apocryphal event at the siege of Jaffa in 1272. Prince Edward (later Edward I) is considering abandoning the siege and returning Daraxa, a captured Arabian princess, to her fiancé, Selim, Sultan of Jaffa, when he is stabbed with a poisoned dagger by a Muslim fanatic, who has come as an envoy from Selim. Daraxa reveals that his life can be saved if someone will suck the poison from the wound, but that that person will inevitably die. Edward rejects the idea that anyone should die on his behalf, but eventually he sinks into a coma. His wife, Eleonora, sucks the wound, and is soon close to death. Selim, horrified that his honour has been compromised by the perfidious envoy, enters the Crusaders' camp disguised as a dervish, with an antidote to the poison. He revives Eleonora and exonerates himself before Edward.

Thomson's debt to Euripides emerges clearly in the central episode of Eleonora's sacrifice. In Act III, Scene iv, Daraxa gives an account of Eleonora's preparations for death closely modelled on the maidservant's speech at *Alc.* 152–95, but there is significant divergence at the end of the address to the bed. Alcestis says only:

Some other woman will possess you, not more chaste and prudent (*σώφρων*), but perhaps more fortunate.

Eleonora's version is:

Thou shalt perhaps
Receive a fairer, a more happy Bride;
But never a more faithful, never one
Who loves her Husband with a fonder Passion.

Again, large parts of Eleonora's dying scene are more or less translated from Euripides, but Thomson misses no opportunity to infiltrate expressions of love. His most significant departures from the Greek come in the speeches of the protagonists. Eleonora's speech begins as what one is tempted to call a 'tenderized' version of Alcestis':

I die for Thee, I self devoted die.
Think not from this that I repent my Vow;
Or that, with little Vanity, I boast it:
No; what I did from unrepenting Love
I chearful did, from Love that knows no Fear.

As soon as she utters the words 'our Children . . .', Edward breaks in with spontaneous vows never to marry again. Thereafter, persuaded to leave before Eleonora actually dies, Edward delivers a speech of shame and remorse, again strongly influenced by Admetus' speech at *Alc.* 935–61.

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Thanks to the extensive borrowings from Euripides, the episode of Eleonora's sacrifice gains a consequence which the death of Alcestis does not have in the French versions. Nonetheless, the heroine has to compete for the audience's attention with Thomson's wholly unrelated ideological preoccupations. It is Sultan Selim who embodies the typical Enlightenment values of reason and tolerance. To Edward's condemnation of Muslim bigotry, Selim replies:

> You call us Bigots. – Oh! Canst thou with that
> Reproach us, Christian Prince? What brought thee hither?
> What else but Bigotry? What dost thou here?
> What else but persecute?'

And the last lines of the play are his:

> Let holy Rage, let Persecution cease;
> Let the Head argue, but the Heart be peace;
> Let all Mankind in Love of what is right,
> In Virtue and Humanity unite.

As in the French versions, Heracles, or his equivalent, gains a significance and moral authority that he does not have in Euripides.

Unfortunately, Thomson also indulged in some gratuitous references to corrupt and rapacious ministers, and represented Prince Edward as the potential saviour of England from his weak and deluded father. This was calculated to appeal neither to Sir Robert Walpole nor to George II, who was not on speaking terms with his son, Frederick, Prince of Wales. The play was due to open on March 29, 1739. It was banned on March 27. It was finally put on in London in 1775, in an adaptation by Thomas Hull, with an epilogue by Sheridan, but it had a more interesting future abroad. German translations came out in 1756 (Leipzig) and 1769 (Vienna). It has also been suggested that J. N. Bouilly derived from Thomson the heroine's name for his libretto, *Léonore, ou l'amour conjugal*, which J. F. Sonnleithner adapted for Beethoven's *Leonore*, eventually *Fidelio*.[24]

Less than fifty years before *Fidelio*, Christian Martin Wieland chose the story of Alcestis to initiate German opera, just as Quinault and Lully had chosen it for their pioneering French opera.[25] His *Alceste*, with

[24] On the banning and subsequent history of the play, see J. Sambrook, *James Thomson, 1700–1748. A Life* (Oxford, 1991), 192–8, and D. Borchmeyer and P. Huber (eds.), *Goethe. Sämtliche Werke. Dramen 1765–75* (Frankfurt am Main, 1985), 882.

[25] Gluck's *Alceste* (1767), the only opera on the theme to have won a secure place in the repertoire, has, of course, an Italian libretto by Ranieri de'Calzabigi, also the librettist of *Orfeo*.

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music by Anton Schweitzer, was staged in Weimar in 1773. Wieland marked what he felt to be the importance of the work by publishing in the *Deutsche Merkur* a series of five 'letters' addressed to his friend, Johann Georg Jacobi.[26] Although Wieland presents himself as an admirer of Euripides, his true judgement differs little from Charles Perrault's, and even where he personally admires the Greek dramatist most, he fears the disapproval of his contemporary audience. Thus, nothing could be 'nobler or more moving' than Alcestis' farewell to her marriage-bed, but 'our over-refined and corrupt taste' will fail to appreciate that. Again, her death-scene is beautiful, her speech is 'all true and natural', but it will not do for 'unser Parterre' (Letter 4). Her insistence that Admetus should not marry again is indelicately forthright for modern taste. Even her silence in the final scene will not do, although Wieland sees its value in helping us to believe that she has really died. Instead, his Alcestis speaks of a beautiful dream that she has had, after which all that was once familiar seems strange.

Admetus, as depicted by Euripides, Wieland finds objectionable by any standards. 'Whose fault is it that Alcestis must die . . .? Who chose to buy his life at so high a price?' No. 'We cannot like a man who could do that. We cannot share in his grief. His tears rouse our anger against him'. (Letter 4). Then there is the 'comic and indecent' quarrel with Pheres. The scene is partly the result of Euripides' love of writing clever speeches, but he also wishes us to understand that Admetus has been driven completely mad with grief. He certainly achieves that, but in a highly unsatisfactory way. Then there is the 'boorish Heracles'. Heracles is, he insists, a secondary personage in the play, yet his divinity demands that we see 'the greatness of his character, his philanthropic heart, his enthusiasm for virtue' (Letter 3). He expects credit for improving Heracles in this way, for 'what have I done that Euripides himself would not have done, had he written his play 2,200 years later?' (Letter 2). In general, Wieland is inclined to attribute the deficiencies of Euripides' version to difficulty in filling the middle of the action, given that Alcestis dies so early on. He has had the same problem himself (Letter 5). His solution has been to show the emotional progress of Admetus from total prostration to the sense that Alcestis' memory lives in him and he in it (Letter 5).

In the matter of the number of characters and events, Wieland seeks

[26] For the text of the play and letters together, see W. Kurrelmeyer (ed.), *Wielands Werke*, 9. Bd. (Berlin, 1931), 343–409.

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simplicity: he eliminates Apollo, Death, Pheres, the two servants and even (except towards the end of the play) the chorus. He introduces one new personage: Parthenia, a sister of Alcestis, who acts as a general purveyor of information between the other characters. He had thought, he tells Jacobi, of introducing some love-interest between her and Heracles, but decided against that, so as not to turn Heracles into an ordinary operatic hero. He exonerates Admetus in the usual way: Alcestis makes her offer without his knowledge. He retains two minimal allusions to Euripidean ambiguities. Parthenia tells Alcestis that she has begged Pheres with tears to die for Admetus, but he remained unmoved, like a statue. Later, when Parthenia tells Heracles that Admetus lives by Alcestis' death, without as yet explaining how it has happened, he exclaims: 'The coward! Could he sink so low as to accept his life at that price?'

It was not so much Wieland's play as the letters, with their recurrent self-felicitation at Euripides' expense, that provoked Goethe to sit down one Sunday afternoon in the autumn of 1773 'with a good bottle of burgundy', and write, at one go, his farce, *Götter, Helden und Wieland.*[27] The souls of Admetus and Alcestis (the 'real' Admetus and Alcestis, not Euripides' characters) are strolling in the Woodland of Dreams, when they hear 'a pair of insipid, affected, lean, pallid puppets' calling each other 'Admetus' and 'Alcestis' and wanting to die for each other. They have eavesdropped on Wieland's poetic imagination. Euripides and Heracles, too, have a bone to pick with Wieland. It is night in the world above, and Hermes, also outraged at being held responsible for material published in the eponymous *Deutsche Merkur*, undertakes to fetch Wieland's spirit while he sleeps. Goethe's Wieland reveals instantly and grotesquely his lack of imaginative sympathy with classical Greece. 'You Alcestis! With a waist like that!' He had imagined her tight-laced, in eighteenth-century style. Euripides begins the attack. Wieland's characters are 'all as like each other as eggs to eggs . . . there is a woman who is ready to die for her husband and a husband who is ready to die for his wife and a hero who is ready to die for both of them, which leaves only that dreary creature, Parthenia, whom one would like to drag out by the horns, like the ram caught in the thicket, so as to put an end to its misery.' You see it differently from me', says Wieland, lamely. Next, Alcestis demands to know what could be the sense in dying for a husband who, 'like your Admetus', loves his wife better than his own

[27] Goethe gives his account of the composition of the farce in *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, Book 15. Wieland had earlier offended Goethe by his lack of respect for Shakespeare.

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life. Admetus must indeed have loved life, or her sacrifice would have been absurd. Then it is Admetus' turn. 'Only cowards fear death', says Wieland. 'A hero's death, yes. But an ordinary householder's death – every man fears that, even a hero. That is nature. Do you think that I would not have risked my life to save my wife from the enemy, to defend my possessions?' Goethe's Heracles is a hearty 'colossus', outraged and bewildered by Wieland's prissy disapproval of his superabundance of strength and virility. For Goethe, Wieland had failed to recognize 'the robust, healthy nature' which is basic to Greek literature.[28] His Wieland is bewildered by his encounters. 'You speak like people from another world, a language whose words I hear without understanding their meaning.' 'We're speaking Greek. That's what you don't understand', retorts Admetus, mercilessly.

One can guess that the version by the great Italian tragedian, Vittorio Alfieri, would have pleased Goethe no more than Wieland's. Alfieri first encountered Greek tragedy in quantity and in the original language ten years after his own career as a dramatist was over. It was in 1795, at the age of forty-six, that he applied himself seriously to learning Greek, and – 'struggling and cursing' – read in the following years Homer, the tragedians, Aristophanes and a number of prose authors. He also translated *Persae*, *Philoctetes*, *Frogs*, and *Alcestis*. In his autobiography he writes that at this first encounter with the play in January 1796 he was 'so much struck and moved and excited by all the emotions of that sublime subject' that, had he not given up writing tragedy, he would immediately have set about composing a new *Alcestis*, in which he would have availed himself of all that was good in the Greek and discarded all that was laughable, 'of which there is not a little in the text.' It is curious that, although *Alcestis* was his favourite play, though it moved him to tears, as a whole it seems to have pleased him no more than it did Wieland.[29]

Alfieri began by translating Euripides' play, with some scholarly seriousness, establishing his own text, with the help of several editions.[30]

[28] *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, loc. cit. n. 27.

[29] L. Fasso (ed.), *Vita scritta da esso* (Asti, 1951), Epoca 4, cap. 26. At the end of his text of the play, he wrote: 'Letta con molte lagrime il dì 17 Gennaio 1796'. At the end of *Ion*, he wrote: 'Et iterum die 18 Decembris 1796. Et praeter omnes alias (excepta *Alcestide*) placuit'. It is tantalizing that he does not explain his preferences.

[30] Part of Alfieri's library is preserved in the Bibliothèque Municipale at Montpellier. He first read Euripides in Canter's edition of 1597 (see above n. 20). He also possessed an edition of *Alcestis* with notes by Barnes, Musgrave and Reiske (Leipzig, 1789), the Latin translation of Buchanan (Edinburgh, 1715. See above, n. 20) and a text with facing Italian translation by Carmeli (Padua, 1743). He wrote one version of his translation in the margins of Musgrave's Oxford edition of 1778. This last is now in the Laurentian Library in Florence.

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Then he set to work on his own version, *Alceste Seconda*. Unlike Wieland, he retains all Euripides' human characters, but, since the dramatic conventions of his time required most of the action to take place indoors, even in Alcestis' bedroom, the chorus become Thessalian matrons. The character of Pheres is redeemed, as well as that of Admetus. The play opens with Pheres lamenting the imminent death of his son, while awaiting the response from the oracle of Apollo, which he has sent to consult. Alcestis enters with news from the oracle: Admetus will live, but she herself has offered to die in his place. Pheres, in horror, offers his own life, but it is too late. The altercation with Pheres survives in attenuated form in Act III, where Admetus reproaches his father, first for having consulted the oracle, then for having allowed Alcestis to sacrifice herself. Alcestis, however, explains all, and the quarrel is soon over. An evident preoccupation of Alfieri is the reduction of the supernatural element. Apollo and Death do not appear on stage, and, more notably, Alcestis does not actually die. While Admetus is prostrate with grief, she is carried away, on the order of Heracles, to 'the great temple of Apollo and Mercury', whence she returns cured. The episode of the veiled woman is reduced to a brief test of Admetus' fidelity, with none of the tension of the Euripidean original. Finally, we learn that the whole sequence of events has been designed by the gods to reveal Alcestis' nobility and Admetus' devotion. The problem of filling the middle of the play, which so exercised Wieland, is solved by Alfieri with the ease of an experienced man of the theatre: Alcestis' near-death is postponed until Act IV.

By way of preface to *Alceste II*, Alfieri provides a whimsical 'Elucidation', in which he describes how he bought the manuscript of a Greek play among a job-lot of second-hand books. As soon as he had translated the play, the manuscript vanished, but Euripides appeared to him in a vision to reveal that the play was truly his and to charge Alfieri to publish the two 'translations' as companion pieces. Through this *jeu d'esprit*, Alfieri makes the same claim as Wieland: this is the play that Euripides would have written, had he lived in the late eighteenth century. In 1806, three years after Alfieri's death, the two plays were indeed published together, prefaced by a dedicatory sonnet to the poet's muse and companion of many years, Louisa, Countess of Albany, widow of Bonnie Prince Charlie.[31]

[31] A very full critical edition of the two plays by C. Domenici (*Alceste I*) and R. de Bello (*Alceste II*) constitutes Vol. III of the *Tragedie Postume* (Asti, 1985).

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The comic potential of the story, ignored it would seem since the fourth century BC, enjoyed a brief revival in the first half of the nineteenth century. *Euripides' 'Alcestis' burlesqued* by 'Issachar Styrke, Gent.' was published in London in 1816. For the dialogue, 'Styrke' uses the four-stressed, rhyming verse of Samuel Butler's *Hudibras*,[32] but he lacks the dexterity in versification needed for success in the genre. Too many of his verses limp, and he too often has to pad to fill up couplets and get rhymes. He appears at his best in the Pheres-scene:

Where is it then I've done amiss?
What dost thou see that's wrong in this?
When my time comes I mean to die,
And seek no deputy – not I.
Then why should you? Dost think the light
Is grown so pleasing to thy sight,
That I must needs not like it too?
I'faith I love't as well as you.

There is little or no interpolated pleasantry or distortion in the rendering of the scene, and it is interesting to observe how comfortably it fits into the burlesque context.

Francis Talfourd's one-act farce, *Alcestis, the Original Strong-Minded Woman*, takes us into the ambiance of early-Victorian pantomime and burlesque. It was produced on the London stage in 1850, when Talfourd was twenty-two, recently down from Christ Church and reading for the bar, but already the author of half a dozen farces and travesties. His protagonists are: 'Admetus, an individual weak in intellect and not recommended by any Faculty' and 'Alcestis, the regular Greek Play Heroine, rigidly correct and perfectly Classical'. 'Orcus' (recognizably the Demon King) is in love with Alcestis, and only comes for Admetus in the hope that she will substitute herself, which, gamely, she does:

Well, since *he* hasn't pluck then to go through it,
My mind's made up – never say die – I'll do it!

. . . .

'Tis done, the very ferry-boat I see,
And Charon, who's to take such care on me.
E'en now, in fancy I'm across the Styx,
And now I'm nothing, literally Nick's.

Since the play was printed, Talfourd must have pleased his audience with his stream of puns and schoolboy jokes, his comic songs and his

[32] 'Styrke' cites Butler's practice of calling Hudibras' squire 'Ralph' or 'Ralpho' as metre requires as a precedent for his own use of 'Alcestis' and 'Alceste' for the same reason.

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sub-plot, featuring the wooing of Admetus' cook, Phaedra, by a policeman called 'Polax'.

Exceptionally, William Morris turns his back on Euripides. His sensuously colourful narration of the myth in *The Earthly Paradise* (1868) is based on the accounts of the mythographer, Apollodorus,[33] with all the magical and marvellous elements that Euripides either did not know or chose to exclude. Morris' Admetus, when told that his life can be saved only by the sacrifice of another's, closes his eyes and accepts his fate. Alcestis decides to sacrifice herself and lies down beside him. In the morning, the king's old nurse finds Admetus recovered and Alcestis dead. There is no Heracles and no rescue. Browning's private judgement on the *Earthly Paradise* in general is harsh, but not without justice: 'Morris is sweet, pictorial, clever always – but a weariness to me by this time.' There is, he says, no 'body' in the work.[34]

Browning's own treatment of the story, *Balaustion's Adventure*, was published three years later, in 1871, ten years after the death of Elizabeth Barrett. The dedication is to the Countess Cowper, to whom, Browning says, 'this poem absolutely owes its existence', but on the verso of the dedication he printed four lines from his wife's poem, *Wine of Cyprus*, and he alludes to her at 2668–75. Browning shared with his wife a comprehensive knowledge of Attic drama which many modern scholars might envy and an admiration for Euripides in particular which was unorthodox in their day. Both had studied the highly influential critical writings of A. W. Schlegel, for whom Euripides marked the beginning of the decline of Greek poetry.[35] For Schlegel, Euripides 'lacked the sublime seriousness of mind' and the 'severe wisdom' of Aeschylus and Sophocles. His aim was 'to please by whatever means'. 'Passion is the principal object with him; his next care is character'. He depicts the heroes of mythology as men of his own day. 'He displays a particular vanity in introducing philosophical doctrines on all occasions'. Schlegel allows Euripides 'the possession

[33] See Apollodorus I.8.2, 9.15–16, III.10.4, 10.8.

[34] Letter to Isabella Blagdon, January 19, 1870, in *Letters of Robert Browning. Collected by Thomas J. Wise* (London, 1933), 134.

[35] Schlegel's *Vorlesungen über dramatische Kunst und Literatur* were published in English translation by John Black in 1815 and reprinted in 1840. My references are to that second edition, Vol. 1, 141–58. Writing to H. S. Boyd on December 31, 1832, Elizabeth Barrett describes how her enthusiasm for learning German has been fired by reading extracts from Schlegel in translation. On March 5, 1843, Browning writes to Alfred Domett: 'How do you get on with German? I read tolerably – and find the best help in Schlegel and Tieck's translation of Shakespeare.' See P. Kelly and R. Hudson (eds.), *The Brownings' Correspondence*, Vol. III (Winfield, 1985), 7 and Vol. VI (1988), 333. For other references to Schlegel, see Vol. III, 90 and Vol. X, 23. So far, publication of the correspondence has reached 1847.

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of the most astonishing talents', but these talents 'were not united with a mind in which the austerity of moral principles and the sanctity of religious feelings were held in the highest honour'.[36] Whatever effect Schlegel's condemnation had on Browning would seem, however, to have been entirely contrary. The poems offer abundant testimony to his fascination with Euripides as psychologist and innovative thinker.[37]

Browning sets his 'transcript' – part translation, part paraphrase – of *Alcestis* within the story of Balaustion, a young woman of Rhodes with a profound admiration for Athens and for Euripides. She recounts the play as she has seen it, with her own running commentary. So, through the person of Balaustion, Browning is able to imagine and interpret the play in detail, like a theatrical director. In order to appreciate the originality of Brownings's reading, one needs to approach it from an eighteenth-, not a twentieth-century perspective. Schlegel's view of the play differs little from Wieland's, or, indeed, Perrault's. He admires the 'beautiful morality' of Alcestis' sacrifice; her death-scene is represented with 'the most over-powering pathos'. But Admetus, and even more Pheres, 'sink too much in our estimation from their selfish love of life'.[38] For Browning, in contrast, Euripides' depictions of Admetus and Pheres are not blemishes to the drama, but character-studies worthy of close analysis. In Admetus, he sees an immature selfishness (879–85):

> So he stood sobbing: nowise insincere,
> But somehow child-like, like his children, like
> Childishness the world over. What was new
> In this announcement that his wife must die?
> What particle of pain beyond the pact
> He made, with eyes wide open, long ago –
> Made and was, if not glad, content to make?

The confrontation between Admetus and Pheres acquires its acrimony from the fact that each recognizes the worst of himself in the other (1364–70):

[36] On the 'moral' interpretation of Greek tragedy in the nineteenth century, see R. H. A. Jenkyns, *The Victorians and Ancient Greece* (Oxford, 1980), 90–3; on estimates of Euripides, 106–10.

[37] In addition to *Balaustion's Adventure*, see *Artemis Prologizes* (1842), *The Ring and the Book* X. 1670–1790 (1868), *Aristophanes' Apology* (1875). C. N. Jackson, 'Classical elements in Browning's *Aristophanes' Apology*', *HSCP* 20 (1909), 15–73, traces in detail Browning's references, not only to the plays of Aristophanes and Euripides, but to the scholia and fragments of both poets and to other Attic comedians. T. L. Hood, 'Browning's ancient classical sources', *HSCP* 33 (1922), 79–181, offers a general list of Browning's references to the Classics, which gives an idea of the width of his reading.

[38] Schlegel (n. 35), 176.

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> Like hates like:
> Accordingly Admetos, – full i' the face
> Of Pheres, his true father, outward shape
> And inward fashion, body matching soul, –
> – Saw just himself when years should do their work
> And reinforce the selfishness inside
> Until it pushed the last disguise away . . .

But, Browning suggests, Admetus' 'poor pretentious talk' already conceals 'the little whisper' of self-reproach. The translation of Pheres' speech, however, shows Browning at his worst (1468–70):

> And whom dost thou make bold, son – Ludian slave,
> Or Phrugian whether, money made thy ware,
> To drive at with revilings?

'Issachar Styrke' did better. Browning's tortuous syntax and studiedly informal blank verse do not suit the forensic style, but one is tempted to suspect that the poet has been further incapacitated by sheer detestation of Pheres. Admetus, however, returns from Alcestis' funeral reformed by self-knowledge, as he accepts the reality of his wife's death.

Schlegel, like Wieland and Racine before him, found Euripides' treatment of Alcestis' death deeply moving. Browning, however, is struck, like many readers since, by the dryness of tone of her dying speech, and the absence of expressions of love for Admetus. Later, Wilamowitz would see 'disillusion' here;[39] Browning is more subtle. For him, consecration to death, symbolized by the cutting off of the lock (*Alc.* 74–6), has given Alcestis a superhuman clarity of vision (676–80; 712–13):

> I believe the sword –
> Its office was to cut the soul at once
> From life, – from something in the world which hides
> Truth, and hides falsehood, and so lets us live
> Somehow.
> . . . .
> She saw things plain as Gods do: by one stroke
> O'the sword that rends the lifelong veil away.

Browning's reading may not be the only one possible, but up to this point the text can certainly bear it. But when it comes to Heracles, Euripides' presentation really pleases him no more than it did Wieland. He is, however, tied to Euripides' text, so he uses Balaustion's commentary to

[39] *Griechische Tragödien*, übersetzt von U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, III (Berlin, 1906), 87. Wilamowitz's interpretation depends on his idea that Alcestis had made her offer as a bride, for which there is no support in Euripides' text.

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over-ride, rather than to interpret it. Heracles' first three words, 'My hosts here!' produce a rhapsody (1030–2; 1045–51):

> Oh the thrill that ran through us!
> Never was aught so good and opportune
> As that great interrupting voice!
> . . . .
> Sudden into the midst of sorrow leapt,
> Along with the gay cheer of that great voice,
> Hope, joy, salvation: Heracles was here!
> Himself, o'the threshold, sent his voice on first
> To herald all that human and divine
> I'the weary happy face of him, – half God,
> Half man, which made the god-part God the more.

This exaltation of Heracles obliges Browning to heap obloquy on the unfortunate servant and his entirely reasonable complaints of the unknown guest's behaviour. It also facilitates a manoeuvre by which Browning seeks to eliminate the ambiguity of the final scene. For him, the purpose of the scene is to prove, both to Heracles and to Alcestis, that Admetus is really a changed man. After Admetus' words at 2271–2 (1096 in the Greek text):

> When I betray her, though she is no more,
> May I die!'

Browning inserts a passage of comment:

> . . . And the thing he said was true:
> For out of Heracles a great glow broke.
> There stood a victor worthy of a prize:
> The violet crown that withers on the brow
> Of the half-hearted claimant. Oh, he knew
> signs of battle hard fought and well won,
> This queller of the monsters! Knew that his friend
> Planted firm foot now, on the loathly thing
> That was Admetos late!

Heracles, with his divine perspicacity, *knows* that Admetus' change of heart is real and permanent, so the audience need feel no qualm when they see him take the veiled woman's hand and lead her into the house before he knows her to be Alcestis. But this will not do. It is not open to the author to jump on to the stage in the middle of the action in order to tell the audience how to take it.[40]

[40] Browning is placing heavy emphasis on *νυν* in 1097: '*Then* take her . . .' He reinforces the point

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Yet, in spite of a degree of distortion, Browning's is the first attempt by a fellow-poet to understand Euripides' play as it is, rather than drastically re-write it. It is also the first recognizably modern reading. But Browning did not stop there: he adds a sketch of an alternative version of the story. Through the favour of Apollo, Admetus has become an exceptional king, wholly devoted to his people's good, when he is suddenly confronted with death. But Alcestis tells him that, without his knowledge, she has already made a pact with Apollo that she shall die on her husband's behalf. Admetus protests, in vain. But Persephone will not tolerate the double spiritual power that Alcestis' act has given to Admetus. Alcestis is sent back, and the royal good intentions are frustrated (2652–60):

> So they two lived together long and well,
> But never could I learn, by word of scribe
> Or voice of poet, rumour wafts our way,
> That – of the scheme of rule in righteousness,
> The bringing back again the Golden Age,
> Which, rather than renounce, our pair would die –
> That ever one faint particle came true,
> With both alive to bring it to effect:
> Such is the envy Gods still bear mankind!

The story of human self-sacrifice becomes an allegory of the relation between gods and man. Browning does not present his version as better than Euripides', nor does he imply that it could have made a play, but his conception of Admetus' superhuman quality as king leaves its mark.

Hugo von Hofmannsthal's version,[41] described as a 'free translation', was first published in 1893. While preserving the general structure of the original, Hofmannsthal tends to abridge: long speeches are reduced, or even cut out, the formality of stichomythia is broken up and most of the choral songs omitted. The chorus itself becomes a group of noblemen of Pherae, with their wives, and most of their remaining lines are attributed to individuals: an old man, a young man, an old woman, a young woman. The unitary male voice of Euripides' chorus has gone. There is, however, a contrary tendency to expand expressions of feeling: the spare, austere emotional vocabulary of Greek is filled out and given

by adding 'since thou canst be faithful to the death . . .' But, unless there is disturbance in the text (which is possible), Heracles' thought is something like: '[You want your wife back] then take this woman'. This is a *non sequitur* to Admetus, but Heracles does not concern himself with that.

[41] For an annotated text of Hofmannsthal's play, see K. E. Bohnenkamp and M. Mayer (eds.), *Sämtliche Werke VII. Dramen 5* (Frankfurt am Main, 1997).

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more colour, especially in Admetus' descriptions of his own distress. Apart from that, Hofmannsthal adopts the usual strategy of ennobling Admetus and softening Alcestis. His treatment of Alcestis' offer, however, avoids the common easy option. His Admetus really does ask for a substitute. Knowing that another's death will save him, 'he trembled between shame and the anguish of death / and asked; and the question barely asked, he repented, and would rather have been dead.' His old parents had heard him, 'but they only looked on and stayed silent'. Alcestis steps forward with her offer, 'the God of Death' hears, and her fate is sealed. Hoffmannsthal's treatment of Alcestis' dying speech has much in common with James Thomson's (see above p. 11). Thus, Euripides' 'I, giving you precedence over my own life, have ordained that you should see the light of day. So I am dying on your behalf, when it was open to me not to die' (282–4), becomes: 'My dear one, that you should only live! / I give my life so readily for that, and die willingly.' Admetus' answering speech is much reduced, and the notorious statue is eliminated. Instead, the image of his own grief will sit with him at meals, stand by his bed, and fix its 'iron eyes' upon him.

After Heracles has entered the palace, the chorus murmur among themselves, until Admetus speaks:

> If there is any here who does not understand,
> Who wants to ask
> How this act is consistent with such sorrow,
> Who finds it harsh and unseemly,
> Let him be silent and consider: the King does it.

Then follows a passage with no precedent in the Greek:

> . . . it is enjoined on me
> To be so kingly that in that I
> Can forget all my own grief.

Alcestis' body in the earth is to be a seed from which all the land shall be renewed. The two speeches are attributed not to 'Admetus', but to 'the King'.

Hofmannsthal's ingenuity in turning Euripides' text to his own purpose is nowhere more strikingly displayed than in the Pheres-scene. Pheres is said to be 'nearly a hundred' and represented as grotesquely old. Admetus' instant burst of anger and his long speech arguing that it was his father's duty to die for him are cut out. Instead, he speaks a few words of forced politeness, while Pheres maunders on, giggling with senile glee at this own survival. At last, he taunts Admetus

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with a translation of 690–701. In this context, the passage becomes absurdly offensive, and Admetus at last loses his temper:

> Be silent, and go, go, go!

The twentieth century saw no diminution of interest in Alcestis. From the first half of the century, Hunger[42] lists versions by R. Prechtl (1908), E. König (1910), G. Renner (1912) and A. Lernet-Holenia (1946), as well as T. S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party.* Prechtl's version became an opera, with music by K. Pembaur. Hofmannsthal provided the libretto for an opera by Herman Zilcher (1916). With minor collaboration from Hofmannsthal, Egon Wellesz wrote his own libretto for his *Alkestis* (1924). Rutland Boughton's *Alkestis*, with libretto by Gilbert Murray after Euripides, was performed at the Chichester Festival in 1922 and again at Covent Garden in 1924. Only Wellesz's opera has shown any potential for survival.

The Cocktail Party was first performed at the Edinburgh Festival in 1949. In his Harvard lecture of 1951,[43] tracing his own progress in writing poetic drama, Eliot says that, after *The Family Reunion*, he again turned to Greek drama for his theme, 'but I was determined to do so merely as a point of departure, and to conceal the origins so well that nobody would identify them until I pointed them out myself.' In that, he says, he was entirely successful. 'But those who were at first disturbed by the eccentric behaviour of my unknown guest, and his apparently intemperate habits and tendency to burst into song, have found some consolation in having their attention called to the behaviour of Heracles in Euripides' play.' But the 'intemperate habits' of Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly, the psychiatrist who restores Lavinia to her husband, seem rather allusive and decorative than fundamental to the drama.[44] There are certainly points of contact with Euripides' play, such as the theme of hospitality and the recurrent metaphor of death applied to Lavinia's desertion, but Eliot is justified in saying that he has used the Greek play 'merely as a point of departure'. The movement is constantly outward; he shows no tendency to turn back to Euripides, to improve or to correct.[45]

[42] See Hunger (n. 1).

[43] 'Poetry and Drama', the first Theodore Spencer Memorial Lecture, at Harvard University, delivered and published in 1951 and reprinted in *On Poetry and Poets* (London, 1957), 72–8.

[44] Sir Henry's song, 'One-eyed Riley', serves, one supposes, to evoke the one-eyed man who is king in the country of the blind.

[45] An interesting and productive attempt to relate Eliot's play to that of Euripides is Robert B. Heilman's '*Alcestis* and *The Cocktail Party*', *Comparative Literature* 5 (1953), 105–16. Heilman suggests that the character of Alcestis is split in two, to produce both Lavinia and Celia, while Harcourt Reilly is a conflation of Heracles, the saviour, and Pheres, the teller of unpalatable truth.

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Thornton Wilder's *The Alcestiad or A Life in the Sun* was produced at the Edinburgh Festival six years after Eliot's play, in 1955. Wilder's original idea had been to use a translation of Euripides' play as the central piece of a trilogy recounting the whole life of Alcestis, but he came to decide that that would not do, and composed his own second act, in which Alcestis devotes herself without her husband's knowledge. According to Wilder himself, 'on one level my play recounts the life of a woman – of many women – from bewildered bride to sorely tested wife to overburdened old age. On another level, it is a wildly romantic story of gods and men, of death and hell, of resurrection, of great loves and great trials, of usurpation and revenge. On another level, however, it is a comedy . . .about the extreme difficulty of any dialogue between heaven and earth, about the misunderstanding that results from the incommensurability of things human and divine'.[46] Even had Wilder's talents as a dramatist been commensurate with his ambitions, it is hard to see how his chosen treatment could have avoided belittling Alcestis' sacrifice by swamping it in melodramatic incident. Wilder's play served as the libretto for an opera by Louise Talma, which was produced in Frankfurt in 1962.

Marguerite Yourcenar's *Le Mystère d'Alceste* is a late exercise (after Gide, Giraudoux, Sartre, Cocteau) in the reinterpretation of Greek myth. It was begun, she tells us, in 1942, and very little changed in the twenty years preceding its publication. She sees the tale as bringing together 'the idea of immortality associated with that of a saviour-god who triumphs over death and the idea of the salvation of one human being through the voluntary sacrifice of another.' The 'mystery' of the title alludes to medieval mystery plays. For her, Euripides does not measure up to his theme, and, in her preface, she adopts a dismissive tone. From the beginning, 'nous avons l'impression de voir tourner assez mécaniquement des rouages bien graissés par un bon dramaturge'. She leaves us with the suggestion that the play is merely a rushed job.[47] Yourcenar's authority as a critic is, however, seriously undermined by her inattention as a reader. She tells us, for example, that Euripides' chorus is made up of Thessalian women. Her general feminization of the piece is thus partly accidental. But not only is her chorus made up of 'voisines', but Alcestis' old nurse, Georgine, a sort of elderly *servante de Molière*, plays a leading part in directing the action with her untutored wisdom. It is she who

[46] See the *Alcestiad, or A Life in the Sun*, a play in three acts with a satyr play, *The Drunken Sisters*, with introduction by Isabel Wilder (New York, 1977).

[47] 'Enfin, n'excluons jamais l'hypothèse la plus plate, la possibilité qu'un Euripide pressé ait bâclé Alceste'. See *Le Mystère d'Alceste et qui n'a pas son Minotaure?* (Paris, 1963), preface, 26.

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persuades Admetus to entertain Heracles (whom he does not know), she who prevents him from watching by Alcestis' body, and she who ordains that Heracles shall watch there alone. Admetus is not a king, but a beautiful poet, dedicated to the worship of Apollo, the sun-god, and, as usual, Alcestis offers herself without his knowledge. Yourcenar's conception of the story requires Death to be a much more dominant and sinister figure than Euripides' chilly official. Her Death is destined to triumph over the Sun and the other gods, and can only be defeated by 'une brute peut-être, un simple au Coeur pur'. The struggle between Heracles and Death takes the form of a debate on a darkened stage. Like Wieland, Yourcenar appreciated the effectiveness of not allowing the resurrected Alcestis to speak, but still could not resist making her do so.

In his 'new version', published posthumously in 1999,[48] Ted Hughes preserves most of Euripides' dramatic framework (more even than Hofmannsthal), while still drastically altering the tenor of the drama. This very closeness to Euripides serves interestingly to emphasize the way in which Hughes deals with the sensitive points of the plot. As usual, he chooses to disculpate Admetus. It is Apollo himself who seeks the substitute, and Alcestis makes her offer spontaneously:

> Admetos sat in his bedroom. You might say
> With a terminal illness. I canvassed for him.
> I was shameless. I asked everybody . . .
> Only one person I did not ask:
> Alcestis. His wife.
> But now you know her story. Of her own accord,
> She has volunteered – to give him her life.

Hughes' second line of defence is the exceptional quality of Admetus' kingship:

> This whole country depends on Admetos.
> It seems everybody's future
> Hangs on the life of Admetus –
> His energy, his inspiration.
> . . . . . .
> His death would have been a national catastrophe.

By this means, Hughes blunts Pheres' attack and destroys his credibility:

> You think you are irreplaceable.
> You think your life is so priceless
> Others must die to preserve it.

[48] *Euripides. Alcestis* in a new version by Ted Hughes (London, 1999).

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You think the entire country
Gets its oxygen only when you breathe in
And sings your praises as you breathe out.

But that, as we have heard on good authority (Apollo, Death), is essentially true. Pheres is made to attack a position which Hughes has already made impregnable. When it comes to Admetus' acceptance of the veiled woman, Hughes' text implies that Heracles uses physical force:

Heracles
Your right hand. This one. Lead her –
Admetos
This is neither the time nor the place for your strength.

Nonetheless, Hughes preserves a sense of discomfort:

Chorus 2
If you ask me, Admetos is a strange one
To let her die in his place.
Chorus 3
Once she'd agreed I thought it was too late
For him to do anything about it.
Chorus 1
Better not look at it too closely.
Chorus 3
At some point it seems the heavens closed.
Chorus 2
Even so, Admetos is a strange one.
Chorus 1
Some things are best not talked about.

Then, in the Pheres-scene, Admetus speaks as if, after all, he had himself asked his parents to die on his behalf, in spite of what we have heard from Apollo. Moreover, the scurrilous violence of Admetus' attack on Pheres shocks and alienates sympathy.

Unlike Yourcenar, Hughes does not expand the role of Death, but his roaring ogre, 'the power of the body', is decidedly more fearsome than Euripides' Death, and, unlike his prototype, he shows some sensual relish for his work:

. . . still so young.
Still juicy, still a beauty.

The most striking and extensive departure from the Greek text is the scene between Heracles and the servant, which becomes a sort of manic

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version of an intercalated masque. With the more or less willing co-operation of Admetus' servants and his own companions, Iolaus and Lichas, Heracles performs a riotous mock-enactment of his Labours, culminating in the release of Prometheus. In all, the violence of Hughes' language and his characteristically lavish use of powerful imagery produce an effect far removed from Euripides.

A chronological review of the material focuses attention first of all on the ways in which the story of Alcestis has been adapted to different literary and theatrical fashions. The version of Quinault is, of course, marked by the operatic genre, but the other version from seventeenth-century France, that of Hardy, also exploits the magical and spectacular possibilities of the tale. Lagrange-Chancel moves in the direction of psychological drama by keeping off stage the magic and miracles which remain essential to his plot. As the eighteenth century progresses, the influence of Euripides becomes much more apparent, and, at the same time, the figure of Alcestis herself gains in importance. The starting point for Wieland and, still more, Alfieri is love (one can use no other word) for Alcestis. It is Euripides' Alcestis who has won their hearts, yet both, while professing admiration, see his play as seriously defective, not worthy of its heroine, at least by the standards of their own day. With time, Euripides seems to tighten his grip on the myth, while the urge to improve on him remains. Yourcenar retains all his characters and his sequence of scenes. Hofmannsthal and, a century later, Hughes retain much of his structure speech by speech, while still changing the content substantially. In twentieth-century versions Christian undercurrents become perceptible. There is Yourcenar's 'mystère' and the reference (to which she draws attention) to Heracles' 'father in heaven'. There is Eliot's crucifixion of Celia ('the heavenly one'). Even Hughes echoes the Commandments with 'the great god . . . is a jealous god'. But the references remain vague and lacking in focus.

More striking than the changes of fashion, however, are certain constants in the way the story is treated. Death is the character most often eliminated, but where that is not so, there is a persistent effort to make him (or, for Yourcenar, her) more terrible and impressive. This entails a corresponding aggrandizement of the hero who defeats Death. But even where Death is absent there is a tendency to make Heracles a nobler, more conventionally heroic figure. For the French dramatists of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, he becomes, more or less, the hero of the story. For James Thomson, Eleonora is the

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emotional heroine of the play, but Selim, the Heracles-figure, its ideological hero, and the moral education of Prince Edward competes for the audience's attention with the devotion of his wife. While promoting Alcestis, Wieland and Alfieri demote Heracles decisively to a secondary position. Yet for them an eighteenth-century sense of decorum combined with nascent romanticism still require that he be ennobled. Browning, unable to escape from Euripides' text, seeks to exalt Heracles through his commentary. Yourcenar's flirtation with Christianity and her staging of the contest with Death and Hughes' evocation of the Labours again give Heracles greater consequence.

Of the human characters, Pheres is most frequently eliminated or reduced in importance. In the primary folk-tale, the parents who refuse to sacrifice themselves are the necessary foil for the bride who accepts. But post-renaissance writers who know of the father's part in the story either ennoble him by presenting him as ready to sacrifice himself and only frustrated by circumstances, or make him grotesquely detestable, a figure for whom it is impossible to feel the slightest twinge of sympathy. There is no modern equivalent for Euripides' witty, formidable Pheres.

The typical modern strategy of making Pheres either better or worse than his Euripidean prototype is at least partly a result of the universal determination to improve the character of Admetus. To writers who do not know Euripides' play (Boccaccio, Gower, Sachs), it never occurs that the hero might ask his relatives to die on his behalf, or that he could at any stage be willing to accept his wife's sacrifice. Those who do know Euripides are unanimous in eliminating Admetus' personal search for a substitute. Hofmannsthal alone takes up the challenge of including the request and of doing so in a way that attenuates to vanishing point its effect on the course of the play and on our estimation of the hero. For every writer except Euripides, Admetus must be impeccably brave, noble, and loving, even if he feels a degree of irrational guilt at his own survival.[49] Indeed, for Sachs (following Palaephatus) and, more emphatically, Quinault and Lagrange-Chancel, it is he who makes the initial offer of self-sacrifice, and Alcestis merely reciprocates. Most often, Alcestis

[49] A few critics have even argued that Euripides' Admetus is to be seen as impeccably noble and courageous. A pioneer in this line was the Jesuit, Pierre Brumoy, whose massive and influential *Le Théâtre des Grecs* was first published in 1730. A recent defender of Admetus is A. Pippin-Burnett, whose 'The Virtues of Admetus', *CP* 60 (1965), 240–55 has been twice reprinted, without its notes, in compilations by E. Segal, *Euripides. A Collection of Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, 1968) and *Oxford Readings in Greek Tragedy* (Oxford, 1983). The same author's bizarre reading of the play in *Catastrophe Survived* (Oxford, 1971), 254–71 has been efficiently disposed of by B. M. W. Knox in his review in *CP* 66 (1972), reprinted in *Word and Action* (Baltimore and London, 1979), 329–42.

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makes her offer without the knowledge of Admetus, and when he discovers the truth it is too late. A minority of writers (Sachs, Hardy, Thomson) allow him to hear the offer made and reject it, but in vain. Some (Hardy, Thomson, Wieland, Hughes) cause another character to seek a substitute on Admetus' behalf. But even so, Alcestis must not be asked; she must make her offer spontaneously. Euripides' Admetus is a king because all the heroes of Greek mythology are kings or sons of kings. But to later writers his kingship tends to acquire special significance. He is either an exceptionally good king (or prince), as for Hardy, Lagrange-Chancel, Thomson, and Hughes, or becomes so in some mystical way as a result of Alcestis' death (Browning in his alternative version, Hoffmannsthal). Either way, Admetus' life acquires a particular value and Alcestis' sacrifice a public aspect.

The generally-felt need to ennoble Admetus is curious, since, especially when combined with the reclamation of Pheres it tends to diminish the sacrifice of Alcestis. It transfers the story to an idealized, romantic world where selfless heroism is the norm, and, as Goethe's Euripides complains, everyone is ready to die for everyone else. Making Pheres grotesquely nasty has a somewhat similar effect, since we are led to conclude that any normal, decent father would have been ready to die on his son's behalf. Only Euripides makes the woman's sacrifice unique by depicting it against a background of normal human selfishness and cowardice.

Euripides leaves us, however, with a teasing uncertainty. Alcestis is exceptional among his self-sacrificing heroines in lacking the opportunity fully to explain her own motivation, for we do not see her take her decision. The same applies to Hofmannsthal, Yourcenar, Hughes and, of course, Browning, who follow Euripides' structure closely. Others either show her at the moment of decision, or at least allow us to see her before the decision is taken, so that she may display her love and concern for Admetus. Only the humorist, Talfourd, gives us a glimpse of another possible motive: contempt for Admetus. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the frankness of Euripides' heroine seemed shocking. From the nineteenth onwards it is rather her reticence that disconcerts and sends interpreters delving into her psychology. One can only regret that neither Racine nor Goethe chose to develop their own versions of the story. Goethe presents Euripides' play not as the truth, but as a version that his 'real' Alcestis and Admetus find acceptable. He does, however, lay down one essential condition: Alcestis' decision to die must be motivated by Admetus' will to live. Beyond that, his Alcestis leaves Wieland with the enigmatic: 'Make of me what you will'.

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