

EURIPIDES' *ALKESTIS*: A READING

The play points up the existence of personal relations within the bounds set by τύχη and ἀνάγκη. Admetos' attempt to evade the rule of τύχη for himself prompts scrutiny of the ways in which man's lot is limited also by social relationships, inside and outside the family. Alkestis, as redeemer, holds out to Admetos an impossible χάρις: her χάρις is annulled, paradoxically, by the βία (inspired by friendship) of Herakles, another redeemer, who restores the natural and moral law that each man must die his own death. The evaluations of life put forward by Pheres, by the chorus (which insists, not with perfect aptness, on the saving power of τλημοσύνη), and by Admetos (initially) are inadequate. But Alkestis' death and Herakles' rescue of her reveal the terms on which life is to be lived and what ἀνάγκη entails.

I

Some of the complexity and subtlety of *Alkestis* can, I suggest, be clearly displayed in a consideration of the impact Alkestis' choice has on the other characters in the play. By way of preliminary, I want to set out, roughly, a typology of the legend. Two categories suggest themselves.

First, the version, transmitted by Apollodoros (I 9, 15), which involves the wrath of Artemis, by excluding the simple, and impersonal, motif of the fate of man¹, provides a contrast to Euripides' handling of the story and to the general moral truth that emerges from it. The roles of Artemis and of the Moirai engender an inconsistency. For if premature death is a punishment inflicted upon Admetos by Artemis, what part do the Moirai have? On the other hand, if Admetos' death is to be held fixed by fate, of which the Moirai are agents or representatives or personifications, then the wrath and the forgiveness of Artemis are unaccountable². The role of Artemis suggests a classification of the legend in this form with others that explore the capriciousness of the

¹ Cf. Dale ix.

² See, on all this, L. Preller-C. Robert, *Griechische Mythologie*⁴, II, Berlin 1920, p. 31; G. Megas, *A/R* 30, 1933, p. 24; L. Torraca, *Euripide: Alceste*, Naples n. d., pp. 66-67; 80, n. 94.

gods and reveal their indifference to any standard of proportion as between deed and punishment¹. Moreover, a tale of Apollodoros' type stands on its head the set of moral values that Euripides is concerned with. I shall try to suggest that Euripides constructs the myth² so as to show how personal relations exist inside the bounds of τύχη.

Secondly, Alkestis stands apart from figures that might, on broadly generic grounds, be classified with her, from Makaria who chooses and others who are called upon to sacrifice themselves for the πόλις or other extended community³. Now, the family may be a πόλις in miniature, in its system of personal relations; but despite the considerations concerning her children, it is for one person, and not so that the οἶκος as a whole may survive, that Alkestis chooses to die. It is however just the setting in the οἶκος that focusses our attention closely on the nexus of personal relationships and on the obligations and moral claims inherent in these⁴. A critical appraisal of the gods does not stand to the fore in this play. No less than Apollo's intervention, it is Admetos' membership in the closely-defined society of the οἶκος that determines what happens in the play, and which compels us to draw this rather than that conclusion at the end of it. In other examples of «freiwilliger Opfertod» the redemptive sacrifice is successful, and the community survives to live under the normal conditions upon which communal existence is founded. The sacrifice-person commits herself to death for something palpably greater than she, and something that honours her death by celebration and commemoration. It is her act, alone, that secures the safety of the πόλις. The folk-tale character of this type of the legend virtually ensures a happy ending: the play is, indeed, a story of rescue, of redemption, of victory over death. But, as D. J. Conacher has suggested, there is a point at which the action might swing towards the tragic or the comic. The ironical and melodramatic aspects of the play have been well

¹ Dale ix.

² I ignore here the problem of its ancestry and of what Phrynichos may have done with the myth; see, for this, Weber, *RhM* 79, 1930, p. 35sq. and Lesky, *SBWien*.

³ On Alkestis' freedom to choose, see Weber, *RhM* 85, p. 154; Kullman p. 145sq.; for the pattern of choice and compulsion in sacrifice-plays, see T. B. L. Webster, *The Tragedies of Euripides*, London 1967, pp. 103-104. For the typology of the story, see Kullmann, pp. 137-138; Strohm, p. 50sq.; Lesky, *GS*, p. 292sq.; Burnett, *Catastrophe*, pp. 22-27; Conacher, pp. 327-333.

⁴ Burnett, p. 243, singles out the density of references to the οἶκος in the play. For treatments of household concerns, relationships and responsibilities, see P. Vellacott, *Ironie Drama. A Study of Euripides' Method and Meaning*, Cambridge 1975 (on *Alkestis*, see pp. 99-105, 227-228); B. Vickers, *Towards Greek Tragedy*, London 1975 (on *Alkestis*, see especially pp. 116-119).

brought out in recent studies; but alongside these there exists the potential, whose realisation is thwarted only at the end despite Apollo's warning to Thanatos, for tragedy; and certainly the play asks serious questions about relationships and responsibilities. The influences upon the human condition of the limits imposed by social relationships, and by man's natural lot as an inhabitant of a physical realm, are evoked for scrutiny. The attempt to escape the terms dictated by the latter leads to a rearranging, and a reappraisal, of the former.

Alkestis' attempt to redeem Admetos is, then, typologically distinctive in the following ways: there is redemption only so that Admetos may see the terms on which life is lived, and that too having accepted a breach of a relationship on which his familial life was founded; the death is, on the face of it, not honoured but denied by Admetos (the hugger-mugger funeral¹; the deception of Herakles); Alkestis by herself does not redeem Admetos, for Herakles, who, like her, submits to the necessity of the mortal lot, saves her from death in order to restore her to him (like Iphigeneia, she is snatched from the ultimate sacrifice, but whereas that is tragic—as seen from within the knowledge of the characters in the play—this veers away from the tragic); Admetos had sought to avoid the death to which his redeemer submits². Alkestis turns inward, to the family and to the obligations imposed and the rights conferred by it; Admetos, perforce, turns outwards, to the public world and its concern with εὐκλεία, τιμή and ξενία. But he is shown by Herakles, emphatically a man of the politic world, how to evaluate these in relation to the οἶκος in which Herakles has only a transient share. The play rests, in part, on the disjunction between Alkestis' intent and the inferences constructed, evaluatively, and acted out by Admetos, Pheros, and the chorus.

II

Admetos exists in a world whose structures and patterns are determined in two ways (distinct only for the purposes of thought—they in actuality coincide and overlap, and reinforce one another, at numerous points): by the natural lot of all men and their acknowledged obligations

¹ If that is what it is, and not simply an inadvertent consequence of the physical demands of staging. But why might we not suppose that Euripides intended a meaning?

² N. Frye, *The Secular Scripture*, Cambridge, Mass., 1976, p. 88, offers a brief account of redemption in our play. On rescue, see Burnett, *Catastrophe*, p. 29sq.

to it (τύχη), over all of which the gods might effectively (if not by «right») exercise some influence; and by the moral, man-made condition as the poet conceives it. In this play, the natural physical lot of man is represented not only by the abstraction τύχη but also by the «Märchenhaft»¹ Thanatos and by the visions of Alkestis; and it can be captured intellectually by reflection on ἀνάγκη. And the moral lot can likewise be grasped (as it is, by the chorus, by Pheres, and by Herakles) in the language of traditional σοφία about death and mortality and also in that of familial relationships, and its power given obeisance by Alkestis' assessment of her own life's course and by Admetos' references to her death and the vacuum it leaves in his life.

In a rough formal correspondence with these two categories, we may distinguish two kinds of human relationship – I claim no more than a formal correspondence, for, though it is true that, just as Admetos overcomes the natural law concerning the irrevocability of death, so too he breaks the natural relationship subsisting between son and father, nevertheless the ethical significance of the latter is of greater moment, both taken by itself and as it is associated with the evaluation of other relationships, than that of the former (even although moralising about ἀνάγκη and the like is connected with ethical probing). At all events, there is the natural, predetermined relationship of parent and child, and there is the contracted (marital and hospitable) relationship. It is chiefly the web composed of these, teased out by the decision of Alkestis, and of varying attitudes towards these that provides the texture of this examination of the play's meaning.

Alkestis' is no ordinary death, occurring in the natural order of things, but one chosen, and that too in an attempt to save a single other, consequent upon an arrangement by which Admetos was to have been exempted from dying. We need not, I think, be much concerned with the details of that arrangement, involving Apollo and the Moirai. Rather than the antecedents of the decision, it is the decision itself and its implications that Euripides reveals². The hierarchy of valuation implicit in Alkestis' death is developed to a greater extent than the theme of the divine power that makes possible this suspension of the natural order. Not itself the object of close moral scrutiny, it is the act of Apollo

¹ On the folk-tale character of Thanatos, see W. Schmid, *Geschichte der griechischen Literatur* I 3, Munich 1940, p. 341, n. 3.

² Rivier, *MH* 1972, p. 128, puts the point from a different direction, concerning realisation of τὸ πεπρωμένον. The emphasis falls on the situation, and not on its determinants; see also Kullmann, p. 143; H. Drexler, *Gnomon* 8, 1927, p. 446sq.; and, generally, Zürcher's chapter on *Alkestis*.

which, in its actual context, prompts moralised representation of human bonds and obligations. It has, indeed, been suggested by some that criticism of the gods is Euripides' (partial) intention ¹, but I do not find this convincing. The obscurity of the link between Apollo's prediction to Thanatos (64sq.) ² and the action of Herakles serves rather to locate the latter in autonomous human action (after all, Herakles' decision to act is fully explained, in human terms: 837sq.) ³, and to divert our attention away from theological implications. The role of prediction in marking out, «at the fringe of tragedy», a fatalistic determination is not central to this play ⁴.

On the other hand, the sacrifice of Alkestis too might be seen as a motor of the action that leads to a development of Admetos' self-awareness in respect of his social bonds. But it is more than that, though we need to be cautious about working backwards, into the «history» of Alkestis' decision, rather than forwards from her revealed conception of her place in the οἶκος ⁵. The sacrifice is a consequence, and a reflection, of her relationship with Admetos; that, in turn, is based on a sense of obligation to him and to the οἶκος, an obligation to be redeemed, beyond even her own personal claims to existence, by death on his behalf. The sacrifice has, accordingly, a particular moral component in that Alkestis' full life, as she herself and others (most notably, the two servants, but also, falsely, Pheres) sketch it, gives out a hint of the kind of χάρις she wishes to bestow. Yet the sacrifice is founded also on an evaluation of her life such as to suggest, not the value of what she gives Admetos, but the value of what she relinquishes. Her χάρις is impossible ⁶.

That impossibility is reflected in an approximate coincidence of natural and moral orders: there could be between Apollo and Thanatos no relationship that is determined by χάρις, for, just as Thanatos refuses to Apollo what the god claims to be the χάρις of saving Alkestis (a refusal that is, however, rooted not only in Thanatos' τρόποι [61] but also in a firm grasp of the nature of νόμος, which he conceives to be threatened by Apollo), so Apollo denies to Thanatos χάρις on his part (60, 70).

¹ Kullmann; Rivier; Lesky, *GS*, p. 293; cf. also Conacher, p. 333.

² On the formal characteristics of the statement, see Kullmann, p. 130.

³ Strohm, pp. 99-101.

⁴ The point is made by O. Mandel, *A Definition of Tragedy*. New York 1961, p. 119 and n. 4.

⁵ Cf. above, n. 2, p. 46; see Lesky, *GS*, pp. 289-290.

⁶ L. Pearson, *Popular Ethics in Ancient Greece*, Stanford 1962, pp. 148-150. For the obligation to repay χάρις, see Burnett, p. 244.

Apollo eschews βία, against the fears of Thanatos, who points uncomfortably to the bow Apollo carries. Not that, but πειθώ and appeal to χάρις, will be Apollo's weapons. But when persuasion fails, Apollo predicts that βία, applied by Herakles, will prevail. Thanatos dismisses λόγοι as profitless, but Herakles will not only speak but also act. What Thanatos refused as χάρις is forcibly secured by Herakles. But Apollo and, later, Herakles are prompted to their actions by an evaluation of Admetos, by φιλία; Thanatos recognises nothing but the necessity, not quite impersonal since it constitutes his τιμαί (53; cf. also 30sq.)¹, of death, and his inflexibility cannot be overcome by Apollo's persuasive references to Alkestis' present and future states (52sq.). No evaluation of life or of obligations to men can weigh with him.

What gods or men like Herakles do, with the best of wills², may be a bursting of the natural constraints; whilst for men like Admetos are left the consequences, for good or ill, of such acts, whether they be disruptive or even restorative. The βία of Herakles annuls the impossible χάρις of Alkestis, but that χάρις was intended as an act of salvation against the natural law, and Herakles' violence restores order.

Admetos addresses himself to the question of divine justice (246-247), failing, ironically, to see the falsity of his statement as it applies to his own case: he thinks, presumably, of the destructive capriciousness of the gods, whereas Apollo had shifted the application of the natural law to save him. What we are invited to view is the mortal aspect of the problem, Admetos' failure and the comparable one of the chorus to understand the terms of life, and the wrenching apart of the family by a natural event converted (if not perverted) into χάρις. Alkestis' χάρις is part of the nobility of her character recognised by the chorus; that is, almost, a datum, and the focus is on Admetos' acceptance of the χάρις (not so much on her giving of it) and on the consequent opening-up of the assumptions of life to his scrutiny. The human moral world is brought into sharper focus when it is set off against, and does not try to dissolve, the natural.

III

The natural fact of death provides an occasion to which several responses are possible, and from which various moral conclusions might

¹ This, however, may not amount to much, for Thanatos is hardly allowed to stand before us as a person; cf. above, n. 1, p. 46. On the moral issue, which is important, see Burnett, p. 242.

² Lesky, *TDH*, p. 298, well points up the critical importance of Apollo's act.

be drawn. The reflections and responses of the characters in this play may be summarised here. i) The chorus preaches *τλημοσύνη* and *καρτερία* in one's god-given lot, and it seeks to abate the flood of Admetos' grief by subsuming (not with complete propriety) his case under a general «law» of human nature. ii) Pheres in his *ἄγών* with Admetos shows one possible valuation of life, different from that put forward by Alkestis, and points up accordingly another side of Alkestis' sacrifice. iii) Admetos wins a measure of insight into the terms upon which life is to be lived, and into the place of the individual who would be self-sacrificing; and he sees what is entailed by «necessity». iv) The necessity of accepting one's lot is both advocated and exploded by Herakles: the figure of *τλημοσύνη* in his own career, he yet seeks to circumvent the circumstances which call for *τλημοσύνη* on the part of Admetos, and so, ironically, he makes possible the redemption. v) The action of Herakles modulates what might have been tragic into an irony suggestive of the disjuncture between man and his natural setting. It is with reference to these points that I wish to organize discussion.

First, the responses of the chorus. The chorus establishes its «intra-dramatic» credentials to speak on the death of Alkestis by representing itself, just as it is represented by others, as *φίλος* and *εὐμενής* to the *οἶκος* of Admetos (210sq., etc.). The notion of *φιλία* is one of the underpinnings of the moral meaning of the play, and it is well to notice at the outset that the chorus is not excluded from this particular nexus of relationships.

But its authority is only that of *φίλοι*, of those acquainted with and sympathetic to the suffering of the household, and is not fully adequate to the moral implications of Admetos' position. It has a tendency to deny, albeit with the best of intentions, and in judgments grounded in sympathy (cf. e. g. 238sq.), what is special about Admetos and Alkestis. We can see this more than once. When the chorus learns that Alkestis is already sinking, its immediate thought is of the loss Admetos suffers. This is, no doubt, conventionally proper enough, but the chorus is concerned only incidentally with what is also central to the situation, the quality of Alkestis herself as a willing sacrifice (144). The slave-woman more appositely evaluates Admetos' response to the loss (145), an evaluation borne out by Admetos himself when he finally becomes aware of the meaning of Alkestis' death for his life (940) ¹.

¹ Dale attaches much weight (properly, I think) to this line as an expression of the change in Admetos' perception of his situation; it reflects «the irony of human intentions measured against their outcome» (xxv); see also Steidle, p. 139, n. 31. But there might be more to be said on the ethical and emotional side: see Conacher, pp. 336-337.

Thus the servant acutely sees the potential for tragedy in the death of Alkestis¹ and in its impact upon Admetos, whereas the response of the chorus remains at the level of rather conventional sympathy for loss. And it is, again, the servant-woman who brings out the implications of the self-sacrifice (197-198), namely that it offers only emptiness to Admetos, and so she pointedly (but unconsciously) adjudges the impossibility of what Alkestis conditionally hopes for (295sq.), a life free from grief². Yet the cool appraisal of the servant (Admetos is described as τὰμήχανα ζητῶν, 202-203), justified by the normal order of life experienced as well as validated by the weight of gnomic tradition, is subverted by the prayer of the chorus at 220sq., a prayer that is to be fulfilled. But the fulfillment is no ready guarantee of happiness, for between prayer and fulfillment there is time enough for Admetos to feel the truth of what the servant has already seen. The morality of the original natural law, that each must die his own death, will be upheld, despite the chorus' hopes.

In that same ode the chorus suggests, as a measure of the completeness of the disaster, that Admetos might contemplate suicide. That ignores the fact that Alkestis' death was to be, not a ground for the ending of Admetos' life, but its salvation. Elsewhere the chorus also expresses a belief, in a kind of hope-against-hope, that all will be well with its φίλος (597 sq.); its reversal of «rational» judgments concerning the futility of this or that behaviour is a measure of its φιλία.

But that same φιλία is, after all, limited by the chorus' application of traditional wisdom. Not that such wisdom is itself faulty³; on the contrary, the call to τλημοσύνη and καρτερία is, traditionally, intended as a positive response to the grief or suffering of others⁴, and, as a way of making sense of the seemingly arbitrary dispensations of man's natural lot, it is often associated with a recognition of the vicissitudes of fortune or of what the gods give⁵. Thus, Theognis, observing that no man is happy in all respects, suggests that the good τολμαῖ quietly, whereas the

¹ Kullmann, p. 130.

² The point is made, dramatically, also in the enacted relationship between Admetos and Herakles; again, it is a servant who points to the truth of the case (see below, pp. 60 and 64sq.). See von Fritz, *AuMT*, pp. 305-306, on the contradiction in the situation into which the sacrifice of Alkestis has put Admetos.

³ The servant-woman's isn't.

⁴ Cf. R. Kassel, *Untersuchungen zur griechischen und römischen Konsolationsliteratur* (*Zetemata* 18), Munich 1958, p. 55.

⁵ So, in the opening line of the play. Apollo speaks of his τλῆναι of his servitude, i. e. of his ἀνάγκη (cf. 7).

δειλός cannot control himself in good or ill; the gifts of the gods are various, so ἐπιτολῶν χρή (441 sqq.). For Theognis in this passage, then, τλημοσύνη is a sign of ἀρετή. Archilochos, too, recommends τλημοσύνη as a φάρμακον for evils, and he supposes that evil passes from one to another, so that present sufferers shall soon be free (13 W.). Traditional wisdom is validated by being tested against the cases of others, formulated first in response to a case felt to be unique, and duly found to be efficacious. But it is essentially anti-tragic, for it leads us to locate responsibility, not in the hero as moral agent, but in some category of power external to him, under which he stands as victim. Here the power is the necessity of dying, from which there is no exemption.

The chorus associates the death of Alkestis and the grief of Admetos with a view of the government of men by ἀνάγκη. Admetos must (ἀνάγκη) bear his lot, since he is not the first nor the last to lose a good wife; indeed, we must (ὀφείλομεν) all die (416sqq.). Ἀνάγκη has him fast, so τλημοσύνη is recommended. You cannot bring back the dead by weeping; even sons of gods die (961sqq.)¹. There is no φάρμακον, whether of enchantment or of medicament, for necessity². The chorus consistently makes two points: first, that death is inescapable; secondly, that mourning is, practically, futile. The points are, of course, related; but the chorus' wisdom does not cover the case of Alkestis, whose death was freely chosen, or of Admetos, whose grief is not inspired only by a sense of loss. The situation is reduced to a normality³.

The force of customary σοφία can be seen with particular clarity in the use of mythological exemplars to stress the irrevocability of death despite attempts to thwart it. Orpheus and Asklepios are both held up for Admetos' (and our) consideration.

Asklepios is thematically more important in the play than the chorus' reference (970-971) to him suggests; in limiting their use of him to the exemplary, Euripides again lets us see how constrained the wisdom and the knowledge of the chorus are. At the outset, explaining how he came to be indentured to Admetos, Apollo tells us that Asklepios was killed by Zeus with the aid of the Kyklôpes, who were in turn killed by Apollo.

¹ For the consolatory theme, cf. e. g. *Iliad* XVIII 117-119; *IG* XII 2, 384, 7-8; on the point, see Kullman, p. 134, discussing ἀνάγκη. The ode is paradigmatic in character (Kranz, p. 217); application of the lesson to Admetos is made with the apostrophic turn at 982 (Kranz, pp. 198-199).

² μοῦσα (962) is «la parole chantée»: M. Detienne, *Les maîtres de vérité dans la Grèce archaïque*, Paris 1967, pp. 10-11 and n. 7.

³ Paduano, pp. 27-28.

Asklepios, in the myth to which Euripides presumably refers here, is the reviver of the dead; Apollo is a rescuer from death, and so he reverses his action in killing the Kyklopes. Asklepios acted (though it is not said so explicitly here) *παρὰ δίκην*; Apollo, having avenged with death that death, restores life to another, *παρὰ δίκην* (cf. 30, 39), but this time the violation of *δίκη* is allowed to stand, as the source of a moral understanding, channelled through suffering and action, greater than that the chorus draws from the mythic exemplum.

For the chorus, on the other hand, Asklepios, who must be part of the reference at 988-990¹, is simply an illustration of the truth that all die and that nothing can revive the dead; and he is the teacher of those who purvey *φάρμακα* for all the ills of man but death. Considering elsewhere the possibility of Alkestis' escape from death, the chorus supposes that Asklepios alone might have saved her, but now that he is dead, there is no *βίου ἐλπίς*, nor *κακῶν ἄκος* (122sq.). That there is no *ἐλπίς*... *σώζεσθαι βίον* is asserted by the chorus again (146); its faint hope is on this occasion crushed by the servant's reference to «fate» (*πεπρωμένη γὰρ ἡμέρα βιάζεται*, 147). Like others, in its own way it is willing, while not eschewing irrational hope completely, to go almost the whole way in accepting the supreme authority of what is conceived to be *τὸ πεπρωμένον*. But it cannot calculate its hope, and, missing the particular resonance of the story of Asklepios as it motivates Apollo, it mistakes also the scope of what might be permitted by *τὸ πεπρωμένον*; and it quite naturally fails to see that, whereas it is true that Asklepios was not revived from death, nevertheless the death of Asklepios is compensated for not only by the death of the Kyklopes but also by the saving of Admetos and Alkestis. Apollo, in this special case, continues the work of his son.

Just as Apollo is an Asklepios who can get away with restoring the dead, *παρὰ δίκην*, so too he is a successful Orpheus. The Orpheus-motif appears first in Admetos' speech at 357sq.: he wishes for the powers of an Orpheus to go to the Underworld and release Alkestis. This is, on the face of it, little more than a conventional way of confronting the feeling of one's own futility that is induced by the death of another; but it is in fact a key to the meaning of death in the play as a whole. Here Admetos seeks the undoing of that which saved him². At 850sq., in what ought to be taken as a thematic reminiscence, a dramatic enactment, of Admetos' words, Herakles announces that, if need be, he will

¹ καὶ θεῶν σκότιοι φθίνουσι παῖδες ἐν θανάτῳ.

² See Schmitt, p. 74.

descend into the Underworld and ask for the return of Alkestis. Through Herakles, Apollo can reach into the Underworld for the dead, and so annul (as he could not by persuading Thanatos) the condition he himself set for the life of Admetos. But that condition cannot properly be cancelled by Admetos himself.

Finally, Apollo is an Orpheus in song (579sqq.): the ode makes clear the links between *ξενία*, the well-being of the *οἶκος*, and the victory over death. The chorus offers a new, if hesitant, appraisal of Admetos' *ξενία* here. Apollo had increased the material wealth of the *οἶκος*, the new *ξένος* is to restore the heart of the *οἶκος*; though the chorus does not know this.

The chorus stands out against Herakles. Having asserted, as it were, the propriety of the Orpheus-motif, he then goes on to act, and this distinguishes him not only from the chorus, which cannot act, but also from Pheres, who was free to act but didn't. Decision and action are matters of revealing his true character, of testifying to his worth (837-839, 859-860, 1119-1120; for parentage and worth proven, cf. 1136-1138); whereas inaction shows Pheres' worth (640-641, summing up 636-639)¹. The foundation of Herakles' (as of Alkestis') action is the complete and dynamic acceptance of what the gods give him; *τλημοσύνη*, not with him the passive submission to the forces that determine his lot recommended to Admetos by the chorus, is turned to positive account in his decision to rescue Alkestis (837sqq.)², and is an index of his ethical quality. But for the chorus, which does not know the reasons for that decision³, the presence of Herakles in the house of mourning is not something that can be approved rationally and dispassionately; rather, from being an occasion of rebuke to Admetos, it becomes a focus of lyrical hope.

That hope is realised, but, ironically, the chorus does not know it even then. It hesitantly counsels Admetos *καρτερεῖν θεοῦ δόσιν* (1070-1071), a repetition of the general drift of its advice throughout the play. Its hesitation is a result of its ignorance of the circumstances of Herakles' return to Admetos' house. So, when the truth is at last revealed, the chorus can comment only on the element of the unexpected in human affairs (1159sqq.).

¹ ἔδειξας εἰς ἔλεγχον ἐξελθὼν δὲ εἰ, καὶ μ' οὐ νομίζω παῖδα σὸν πεφυκέναι.

² With *δειξον* (838), cf. 640 (above, n. 1).

³ It is taken while the chorus is absent from the stage.

IV

Whatever the deficiencies of the chorus' assessment of Admetos' lot, it is well-intentioned. Not so Pheres. The meeting between Pheres and Admetos points up, by showing the tenacity with which the old man clings to life, the value of Alkestis' sacrifice¹. And it suggests that there are two sides to that sacrifice. Hitherto, neither the chorus nor Admetos has questioned either the nobility of Alkestis or the propriety of accepting her renunciation of her own life². The chorus especially, committed as it is to convention in values as in consolation³, sees nothing morally problematical in it⁴. Now Pheres shows that, from his own particular point of view, one that might be justified by the brevity and precariousness of life, Alkestis' «nobility» (619sq.) can be translated into «folly» (728)⁵; and he raises up considerations that undermine Admetos' acceptance (by no means complacent) of Alkestis' death, and serve to suggest doubts concerning the worth and meaning of the sacrifice⁶. It is true enough that Admetos, even after the scene with Pheres, does not ask how he could have accepted the sacrifice; but he does now see the consequences, in terms of isolation and ill-repute, of his acceptance.

Dale (on 697) argues that the ill-fame to which Pheres refers «is not just, or fair, or objective, or the general judgment on Admetos». But Admetos does accept it as a potent element of the terms of living, as we can see in his various references to κληδών and εὐκλεία; he does think of his reputation as part of the generality of ties that serve to fix him in the social and moral world. What Alkestis gains from her death, he says, is freedom from μόχθοι, and εὐκλεία; he, κακῶς κλύοντι καὶ κακῶς πεπραγόντι, will have a λυπρὸς βίος and suffer the slanders of enemies (935-961). It is true enough, no doubt, that the character of Pheres is

¹ Cf. Vicenzi, pp. 530-532.

² See especially Kullmann, pp. 133-134 (on 280sq.) and 141; Steidle, p. 139. To say, as does Lesky, *SBWien*, p. 79 (cf. also Zürcher, p. 32), that Euripides nowhere gives us a motive for Admetos' acceptance of the sacrifice, does not exclude the reasonableness of Admetos' questioning of its consequences.

³ Kullmann, p. 140.

⁴ Its comments at 473sq., hoping for a marital partner like Alkestis, ἡ γὰρ ἂν ἐμοὶ γ' ἄλυπος δι' αἰῶνος ἂν ξυνεῖη, make that perfectly clear; see Dale, *ad loc.*

⁵ So too, from a different point of view, and with a different intention, Herakles suggests (1093) that Admetos' sense of obligation to Alkestis (κεῖνην... τιμᾶσθαι χρεών) can be understood as μωρία; see below, p. 68.

⁶ Cf. Kullmann, p. 139.

disreputable¹, but if we focus on his διάνοια and not alone on his ἦθος, we can see that he makes several palpable hits², and so compels, unawares, Admetos to a new insight into his position (with 694sq. cf. 954sq.).

V

Concentration on Admetos helps us to understand the meanings of the human relationships that constitute the texture of the play³. All other characters are defined, principally if not exclusively, by their relationship with him⁴.

The death of Alkestis has postponed (though not indefinitely, as Pheres insinuates: 699-701) his own death, and has given him what turns out to be, not quite an empty immortality, but a condition apparently unlimited by the finality of death. Admetos, on seeing the impact on himself of Alkestis' death, himself points up the paradox of his situation. He accounts her dying a betrayal⁵, and a destruction of what

¹ Though not so bad as some have made out: see, e. g., Burnett, pp. 247-248 (*Catastrophe*, pp. 40-41) on the aptness of Pheres' character to the play.

² Steidle, p. 144, discusses the technical effects.

³ Against such concentration, see, e. g., Dale xxvii; Lesky, *SBWien*, p. 79 and *Gnomon* 7, 1931, p. 140. See next n., and, on Admetos and Herakles, Burnett, pp. 246-247; Conacher, pp. 332-333.

⁴ I say very little about, without meaning to diminish, Alkestis as a central figure in the play; her particular ἀρετή is well handled by Rohdich. She sacrifices herself to her obligations toward Admetos; she has obligations also to her children, as she sees (379; 388-389; cf. Vicenzi, pp. 527-528; Pohlenz, p. 243; Zürcher, p. 25; Lesky, *TDH*, p. 159), but these are not allowed to conflict with the other obligations. The tensions that exist in Alkestis as death approaches do not develop into a conflict; and she and Admetos are not estranged by her decision. See on all this Zürcher, p. 27sq., especially 29-30 for a forceful statement that the essence of Alkestis, culminating in her willingness to sacrifice herself, is fundamentally identical with her part in the development of the action; also Paduano, p. 50. We are compelled, by Euripides' studied vagueness as to the circumstances of Apollo's dispensation and of Admetos' canvassing for a volunteer, to focus on the consequences, not on the conditions, of Alkestis' decision. The characters have very little history *ante fabulam*: see, e. g., Rohdich, p. 26, criticizing von Fritz and Vicenzi; and Burnett, pp. 240-241.

⁵ The interpretation of προδοῦναι (180; 202; 250; 275) is difficult. The verb is used elsewhere (e. g. *Suppliants* 1017; see Schmitt, p. 73) of self-sacrifice, from the point of view of the survivors, and so it might here be only «abandon», not «desert»: see Rivier, *MH*, 1972, p. 135 and *Actas del III Congreso español de estudios clásicos*, II, Madrid 1968, p. 288; Lesky, *TDH*, p. 293. But in this play προδοῦναι refers, I believe, to a breach in the reciprocity of the relationship of obligation: the reference is paradoxical, for Alkestis «abandons» Admetos to avoid «abandoning» him (Paduano, p. 43; Burnett, *Catastrophe*, p. 27). For Admetos' possible betrayal, see 1057-1060, where προδοῦναι is countered by σέβειν, and 1096, where it is the contrary of τιμᾶν (cf. 1092).

is best in life for him. She gave up, for the sake of his life, what gave her *τέρψις* (cf. 289); that is, she shows that there is a sanction for action greater than that provided by pleasure. But Admetos, refusing to die himself, finds that the *τέρψις* has gone from his life (347; cf. 943; 1084), and he proposes to substitute for Alkestis what will give *ψυχρὰ τέρψις*, bearable only because it relieves the burden of his *ψυχῇ* (353-354). Pheres, however inadequate his account of life might seem beside that of Alkestis, is at least honest and direct in admitting the power of life's pleasantness to hold him to his life (691sq.).

After the funeral, Admetos feels, not regret for the past, but doubt for the future¹: he is uncertain of the terms upon which his life is to be lived henceforth, being deprived of that which, he now sees, gave it value. By wishing to die with Alkestis², he approaches, on the emotional and almost instinctual level, an understanding of what her death-for-him means: he too, unconsciously, wishes to annul the conditions on which he is now to live life (cf. above, p. 52), indeed, to nullify his life itself, and so (without knowing what he does) to render meaningless the sacrifice made for it. The tragic commonplace of grief contrasted with the joy of the wedding-day (915-925)³ has special point here: it is not simply a question of two modes of life, separated from one another by the death of a beloved, but a matter of a death that was to be the condition of continued life, even if it is to be continued in grief. With a wisdom that grew out of her appreciation of what her sacrifice is worth, Alkestis had sought to dissuade Admetos from his existential despair (380-383). But that despair is to be a source of enlightenment as to life's conditions.

Again, in concealing from Herakles the fact that the dead person is Alkestis, Admetos is to that degree seeking to deny the significance of her death. Herewith the grand paradoxical design is again sustained, by the contradiction between his action here on the one hand and on the other his complaint of desertion and his desire to die himself on the ground that without Alkestis he has nothing. We can see in the reception of Herakles into the house a reversal of the effective denial (343sq.), given as a pledge of grief to Alkestis, of the hospitality for which the house has won a reputation. Admetos seems to be attempting

¹ See T. G. Rosenmeyer, *The Masks of Tragedy*, Austin 1963, p. 281; also, particularly concerning the interpretation of *ἔπειτα μυνθάνω* (940), Rivier, *MH*, 1973, pp. 137-138.

² So he realises, almost, the chorus' suggestion at 228sq.; cf. above, p. 50.

³ Wilamowitz, *Isyllos von Epidauros (Philologische Untersuchungen 9)*, Berlin 1886, p. 69, n. 45.

to fill the vacuum left by Alkestis, to replenish the moral substance of the house (cf. 565-567).

The paradox rests on evaluation of *φιλία* and *ξενία*. Admetos' *σέβας* of the tie that binds him to Alkestis leads him to overvalue that determinant of the human lot that is called *φιλία*, and in the rupture of *φιλία* he sees only his own demise (277-279). With Herakles the matter is somewhat more complex: Admetos puts perhaps too great a strain on *φιλία* by insisting that Herakles remain, and yet he refuses to acknowledge the claims of *φιλία* to participation in the troubles of the house. It is true that for Admetos herein consideration of what others will say counts in evaluating not only the worth of Alkestis but also the *φιλία* of Herakles. But, although prudential reasons count in *φιλία*, with Herakles as with Alkestis, he misvalues *φιλία*.

It is sometimes said of Admetos that he goes to extremes, in paying attention to public opinion and to the claims of *ξενία*, in his wish to deny the death of Alkestis and yet to die with her whose death is to be his salvation, and in his protestations of grief¹. But, however valid these points might be as indices of his character², it is at the extremes that he recognises the truth about his *s i t u a t i o n* (cf. especially 353 sqq.: 533sqq.; 954sqq.).

His position is defined, socially as well as morally, not only by his responses to it but also by relationships. The willingness of Alkestis to die for him leads to a radical redefinition of these relationships and consequently to a perception also of the moral position. In other cases of «freiwilliger Opfertod», as we have seen, the claim of the *πόλις* is greater than that of the *οἶκος*, is indeed absolute, and so the individual sacrifices himself for the *πόλις*. Such a death is an expression of the solidarity of the community. Here, however, despite what could be said about the duties of wives to households in fifth-century Athens³, *φιλία* within the family operates to the ostensible benefit of one member, but also opens a breach, as when Admetos rejects Pheres' claims to the treatment appropriate to a parent, claims which Pheres argues cannot be diminished by his refusal to die for his son.

Again, house, family, and *ξένοι* are not only an objective part of the system of links between the individual and his world, but also things to

¹ E. g., von Fritz, *AuMT*, p. 260. But on the duration of the public mourning (430-431), see Steidle, 133-134; and Dale (*ad loc.*) argues that the speech at 365sqq. is sincere; see also Burnett, p. 254, n. 5.

² On the aptness of his concern with *εὐκλεία*, see Lesky, *GS*, p. 290.

³ See, e. g., W. K. Lacey, *The Family in Classical Greece*, London 1968, p. 176.

be evaluated. Pheres' evaluation differs from Admetos'. Whereas Pheres is inclined to justify relationships by limiting obligations of one member to another and to restrict the value of εὐκλεία (cf. 726)¹, Admetos is concerned to maintain εὐκλεία through exploitation of the household and its resources, even when that may not be perfectly appropriate, and so he tends to judge relationships by what they contribute to him, as we have seen. In a series of comments after Alkestis' death that depreciate that death, he nonetheless sees it (appropriately) as a matter of εὐκλεία for her (938)². As for the chorus, it links the φῆμαι about Alkestis with a notion that she will be μάκαιρα δαίμων (995sqq.): her decision to die will be vindicated by her reputation³ and by the power she will be acknowledged to have over the lots of others (1005). But Pheres' point about relationships is a substantial one. What matters immediately is that Alkestis is the core of the household, and her death leaves it hollow (cf. 414-415), as even Admetos comes to see.

Admetos' responses to Alkestis' decision help to create a tension between public and private, domestic and communal, of which his concern with reputation is one aspect. On the one hand there stand Admetos' responsibilities to his family and (freely assumed) to the memory of Alkestis, and, on the other, there exists the possibility of public censure. If Admetos had died, Alkestis would have been free to marry again, without incurring such reproach. But in dying for Admetos, she brings into play a strong sanction against his remarrying, and this gives special point to his general fear of public opinion, and to his refusal to extend the hospitality of the οἶκος to the woman brought by Herakles. That fear is validated, and the claim of Alkestis to some measure of control over Admetos' future vindicated, by the comments of the chorus at 463-465⁴.

Admetos is well aware how the private and public aspects of life together bring intolerable pressures on him (941sqq.): emptiness within

¹ Lesky, *GS*, p. 292.

² εὐκλεία is an important component of the theme of self-sacrifice: cf. *Iphigenia at Aulis* 1368sqq.; *Suppliants* 1015 and 1055sqq.; see Strohm, pp. 62-63; J. P. Guépin, *The Tragic Paradox*, Amsterdam 1968, pp. 156-157. More particularly, it might be said that Alkestis, having by her sacrifice brought herself out into that public arena in which honour counts and in which alone it is bestowed, wins the honour that ought, for other virtues, to have been accorded to Admetos; the point is made generally by M. Shaw, *CPh* 70, 1975, pp. 256-257, though in *Alkestis* we have an exception (with dramatic aptness—see below) to his statement about «bad» women. See also Burnett, *Catastrophe*, p. 34.

³ She is, otherwise, ἀρίστη γυνή in the chorus' estimation (83; 151; 235-236; 241-242; 442; 742); and Admetos accounts her so at 324 and 899.

⁴ εἰ δέ τι / καὶ νὼν ἔλοιτο πόσις λέχος, ἢ μάλ' ἄν ἐμοίγ' ἄν εἴη / στυγθεὶς τέκνοισ τε τοῖς σοῖς.

will drive him out of the house, to sights that remind him of what he has lost, and to public censure. It is not simply that he merely fabricates for himself the force of public opinion. That force is a real and potent factor in determining the quality of the individual's lot (557-558; cf. 960-961). More explicitly, Admetos uses it at 955sq. to express his own awareness of his failure *τλῆναι* the natural lot.

What is publicly known about Alkestis is the *τιμή* 'she confers upon Admetos by choosing to die for him, and the fact that she is *ἀρίστη γυναικῶν* (154-155; 83-85 and 150-153). That is, what she is a matter of *δόξα*, of public opinion, and that is founded on her choice and on her action, in so far as her death is a fulfilment of her *ἀρετή*¹. But her private nature does not depend on *κλέος*, much as she respects that manifestation of public approval. Rather, it is concerned with her children and with their lot, and more generally with the *οἶκος* as a human institution, symbolic of a communal existence, and constituent also of her *ἀρετή*². We see that concern first through the eyes of the servant, who reports to the chorus the private doings of Alkestis (141sq.)³. Then Alkestis herself gives as the reason for rejecting the possibility of life the impossibility of existence as the widow of Admetos and the mother of *παῖδες ὀρφανοί* (287-288). There is no tragic division between the two aspects of her *ἀρετή* (cf. above, n. 3, p. 55).

The death of Alkestis, then, shows to Admetos the conditions of life itself. These are conceived as a nexus of natural (parental-filial) and contracted (marital and hospitable) relationships, and as the structures they entail in individual moral life. Mourning helps to reorder social relationships, as attempts are made to find someone to fill the role of the departed. In this case too a feeling that obligations have been ignored inspires Admetos to invent for himself a parentage that, by explaining why Pheres did not act for him, annuls the bonds between them, and so makes it possible for him to substitute Alkestis (633-647, esp. 640-641)⁴. In fact, here the departed assumes a new repertory of roles. Alkestis is held to be mother and father to Admetos (646-647)⁵;

¹ Cf. Rohdich, p. 28.

² Rohdich, p. 29.

³ The contrast between *πᾶσα πόλις* and *ἐν δόμοις* at 156-157 is thematically important.

⁴ Admetos makes explicit his expectations of paternal obligation at 666-668: *εἰ δ' ἄλλου τυχὼν / σωτήρος πύργος εἰδορῶ κείνου λέγω / καὶ παῖδά μ' εἶναι καὶ φίλον γηροτρόφον*. These entail also obligation to the «parent».

⁵ Rohdich, p. 34, discusses the crucial place this occupies in Admetos' fulfilment of the promise made to Alkestis at 336-339; Paduano, pp. 107-108, analyses the meaning of the «figura espressiva» for the affective bonds emphasized in the play.

Admetos disowns his blood-parents (n. b. 675sq.; 738). To the slaves Alkestis is a mother; Admetos is to be a mother to his children. Into this family as it is in process of realignment comes Herakles; ξενία has, as we shall see, claims that set aside what is (held to be) particular to the οἶκος (n. b. 813).

Admetos notes the reciprocity inherent in the ξενία-relationship (559-560). But he is aware too of the impropriety, from the point of view of the guest, of his studied deception. Yet over against that he sets the importance of τιμή (565-567), of the obligation of honour to another. He is caught between his commitment to Alkestis and the demands of public values as he sees them¹, and he resolves the problem by an uneasy compromise by which Herakles will dine alone. Φιλοξενία weighs heavily. His defence of his φιλοξενία seems to be vindicated by the chorus in an ode (568sq.) celebrating his reception of Apollo; the ode concludes with the expression of the chorus' confidence that θεοσεβῆ φῶτα κεδνὰ πράξειν². After all, it is on his nobility and piety that the chorus focusses.

His position herein established is undermined in the ἀγών with Pheres. First, he fails to note the reciprocity implied in parental-filial bonds, whereas Pheres is clear about what can be expected (681sq.); secondly, in his treatment of Pheres he holds εὐσέβεια and τιμή to be of no practical account.

So the reordering of relationships is more than merely formal or nominalistic; it is affective, and moral as well, and Admetos' performance of it is faulty, as is made clear not only by the ἀγών with Pheres but also by the scene involving Herakles and the servant. The slave's comments on Herakles' behaviour carry with them criticism of Admetos' acceptance of the host's obligations (747sq.); and he refuses (as Admetos had, but for different reasons) to admit Herakles to full membership of the οἶκος (813). The festivity accorded Herakles is no reconstitution of the old hospitable ways of the house³; that cannot occur with Alkestis dead. We accept with sympathetic understanding the slave's assessment, in view of 747sq.; that that is no private view, nor a ploy for pity born of resentment at his service, is shown by 192sq.⁴.

¹ On his dilemma, see Rohdich, pp. 31-32.

² On the structure of the ode and its formal connection with the action to follow, see Kranz, pp. 197 and 209-210; on its pivotal position, Burnett, pp. 243 and 246-247.

³ Cf. von Fritz, *ΛυΜΤ*, pp. 307-308.

⁴ 767-770: ἡ δ' ἐκ δόμων βέβηκεν, οὐδ' ἐφεσπόμεν / οὐδ' ἐξέτεινα χεῖρ', ἀποιμῶζων ἐμὴν / δέσποιναν, ἡ 'μοὶ πᾶσι τ' οἰκέταισιν ἦν / μήτηρ. 192-195: πάντες δ' ἔκλαιον οἰκέται κατὰ στέγας / δέσποιναν οἰκίροντες. ἡ δὲ δεξιὰν / προύτειν' ἐκάστωι, κοῦτις ἦν οὕτω κακός / ὃν οὐ

Φιλία not only subsists between Admetos and Alkestis ¹; it is also recognised with particular clarity and expressiveness at the onset of death (201, 231; cf. 351, 355). It is φιλία that holds the οἶκος together, φιλία whose absence threatens its cohesiveness. In the reshuffling of relationships to which Admetos is impelled by Pheres' refusal to die for him, the person who is the salvation of Admetos becomes for him the object of filial duty (667-668; above, p. 58). The duty of φιλία, denied to Pheres (cf. 630), is transferred primarily to Alkestis, and the creation of a filial relationship characterized (as that between Admetos and Pheres is not) by affective φιλία is sustained by Admetos' assertion that his future hatred of his parents (an expression of grief for Alkestis—336sq.—given reality in the scene with Pheres) is justified by their failure to be φίλοι ἔργωι (339). This means that Admetos again judges φιλία by the actions of the φίλος and their contribution to his welfare. But all that is a weak support for a new affective relationship, upon which he places too great a burden (Alkestis being about to die) ². So again Admetos' reorganization of his personal relations is faulty, and this time it is he himself who so marks it, by his words at 734sq. These words point up the irony of his position.

But φιλία is not only, or even chiefly, affective; it comprises also what we would call duty, and it is this aspect of φιλία that above all impels Alkestis to her sacrifice. It is she who manifests φιλία (340), who translates the theory into practice. The reciprocal character of φιλία demands that Admetos repay the obligations incurred to Alkestis. Death cannot annul these (895; 991-993; cf. 866; also 930) ³. They are formally celebrated in the giving-over of the children by Alkestis to Admetos as a pledge of his promise never to reconstruct the οἶκος by remarriage ⁴. This is his duty to her.

προσεῖπε καὶ προσερρήθη πάλιν. So the man-servant's tendance of the guest excludes him from sharing in what made the other slaves affectively part of the οἶκος.

¹ On this question, and on the question that can be properly asked about the relationship as it appears before us, see Vicenzi, pp. 518-519; also, more generally, Lesky, *GS*, p. 285sq.; Rivier, *MH*, 1972, p. 135sq.; Steidle, p. 135sq.; Burnett, p. 245 and *Catas-trophe*, p. 35. I disagree in this particular with Rohdich, who, in asserting (p. 26) that there is no «Liebe» between Admetos and Alkestis, mistakes the nature of the bond and the consequences of the sacrifice. See, for the other side of the question, Paduano, p. 40sq.

² Contrast *Iliad* VI 413-430.

³ And at a more profoundly affective level the references to Orpheus (357-359) and to Protesilaos (348-354) sustain the idea that «love is stronger than death»: cf. D. M. Jones, *CR* 62, 1948, p. 51.

⁴ On φιλία as manifested here, cf. Rivier, *MH*, 1972, p. 136, n. 53.

But reconstructed it presumably must be; and how else, effectively, than by marriage? This is his duty to the οἶκος. Some reconstruction is, in Admetos' judgment, a matter of ἀνάγκη (378). But his attempts to find substitutes in his transpositions (to say nothing of his stone bed-mate) are doomed. He can, indeed, dismissing his fantasy about saving Alkestis like an Orpheus¹, look forward to a reconstitution of the οἶκος only in death (363-364). In fact, to remarry would count as a breach of the τιμή he owes to Alkestis (373); τιμή plays, as we shall see, a role at the centre of his attempted reorganization of the οἶκος. The very necessity of entrusting the children to their father shows up the emptiness at the centre of the οἶκος, and the impairment of the φιλία that embraced the whole household is expressed in the laments of child and of slave (406; 767sq.). Alkestis has given Admetos a gift so large, so prepotent in the obligation it imposes for return, that it threatens to destroy him.

The new structure, having as core no living person but a tissue of obligations remembered, affections missed, emotions confused, and roles and values misplaced, is labile. Admetos' maintenance of the new bond that is intended to transcend the fact of death is threatened, in different ways, by Pheres and by the chorus, and is almost abandoned by him himself.

We have already seen how the chorus reduces the uniqueness of the case to a pre-cut pattern. As for Pheres, he extends the realm of τὸ φίλον² to include life itself, the preservation of what is individual about a man and the enjoyment of existence (703-704; 772; cf. above, p. 55). All this puts a point on Admetos' feelings of futility without Alkestis. Life, Pheres holds, can be lived without at least prospective heed of what others say, a view that, in Admetos' opinion, convicts him of ἀναίδεια (725-727); while Alkestis, herself nobly concerned with reputation, had held out the possibility of εὐκλεία for Admetos' parents, had they chosen to die for him (291-292). For Pheres, φιλία does not entail «open-ended» obligations; it is much more limited and looser than Admetos' demands on it and Alkestis' action for its sake would suggest. The requirements of paternal φιλία are satisfied by provision of the material necessities of life³. Beyond a certain point, soon reached, Admetos' life is his own, and he has no further claim on his father's

¹ For dismissive ἀλλ' οὖν (363), see J. D. Denniston, *The Greek Particles*, Oxford 1954, p. 443.

² As to Alkestis and τὸ φίλον, see Admetos at 340-341.

³ For Alkestis, on the other hand, neither life as a whole nor obligation as part thereof is to be measured by material necessities: θνήσκω, παρόν μοι μὴ θανεῖν, ὑπὲρ σέθεν, / ἀλλ' ἄνδρα τε σχεῖν Θεσσαλῶν δὲν ἤθελον / καὶ δῶμα ναιεῖν ὄλβιον τυραννίδι (284-286).

(685-686). Each is to die his own death; Pheres has no claim on the life of Admetos, nor Admetos on that of Pheres. This subverts the principle accepted by Alkestis.

Pheres values life because it is pleasurable, and short; Alkestis had claimed that there is a higher principle than *τέρψις*, estimable though pleasure is (289), and length of life in itself is of no account. It is not youth and age that, for Pheres, are opposed, but life and death; the opposition is absolute, not contingent¹. What is for Admetos the supreme act of *φιλία* is for Pheres, on this showing, mere *ἀφροσύνη* (728); whereas, for Alkestis, to accept the obligations of *φιλία* had been part of *εὖ φρονεῖν* (302-303). For all the egotistical plausibility of his argument, there is something circumscriptive in Pheres' view. For him, the *ψυχή* is *φίλα*, but *ψυχῇ μιᾷ ζῆν, οὐ δυοῖν, ὀφείλομεν* (712), and that in his view is the individualistic moral exigency of being, it is a duty owed to the conditions on which we live life. It also belies his appreciation of Alkestis (619sq.), an appreciation based on the implicit belief that his life is bound up with his son's.

But Admetos at last succumbs to Pheres' morality (883-884)², and in applying the principle to his own case (not to Alkestis') subverts his marriage, the practical expression of *φιλία* that was the means whereby his *ψυχή* was enabled to survive. Alkestis had asserted *ψυχῆς ... οὐδέν ἐστι τιμιώτερον* (301); if that principle could have been taken up by Admetos, it would have enabled him to live life on the terms proposed for him by Alkestis³.

VI

Admetos twice asserts a distinction between Alkestis and the rest of the *οἶκος*: she is *ὄθνεϊος* and *θυράτῃ* (533; 646)⁴. He denies her membership in the family in the first place in order to permit Herakles an honorary (and ostensibly honorific) place in it; and, in the second, to reduce, by contrast between her deed and her status, the claim of Pheres to participate in the funeral rites and so to be held kin to

¹ Rohdich, p. 35, gives a good rendering of the point.

² «I envy the unmarried»; *μία γὰρ ψυχή, τῆς ὑπεραλγεῖν μέτριον ἄχθος*.

³ Cf. Rivier, *MH*, 1973, pp. 133-134.

⁴ Admetos is justified, within limits, in using *ὄθνεϊος*, for it is properly distinct from *συγγενής* (532): Steidle, p. 146, n. 76, criticizing the conclusions drawn by Smith, p. 135. But the term is meant to deceive, as if Herakles had intended to exclude other relationships than those mentioned in 532.

Admetos. The assertion, then, both expands and contracts the circle of the family.

The *oikos* now excludes (ἐνδίκως, as Admetos supposes, 647)¹ the parents of Admetos; and it seeks to close its doors (again, for a similar reason—one that acknowledges the honour due Alkestis—but with greater propriety) against Herakles' woman. But it includes Herakles himself, and this time Admetos appeals to a sanction different from but as effective as *dike*. This is the necessity of *timē* (567); *timē* is conceived as an expression of the bonds of obligation (cf. 1092), and had been invoked by Alkestis as a sanction against Admetos' remarrying (see above, p. 62). Admetos will effectively exclude Pheres from carrying out the obligations due, under normal circumstances, to a deceased daughter-in-law, by rejecting his right *timάζειν* her (618-620 with 629-632)². But the traditions of the house (as well as fear of being accounted ἐχθρόξενος) do not permit Admetos ἀτιμάζειν ξένους (553-567).

Furthermore, Admetos breaks, for Herakles' sake, his resolution concerning festivity; and that, paradoxically, embraces Herakles within the household and also, by the compromise Admetos makes with himself (above, p. 60), gives him what ultimately becomes an uncomfortably special status within it. Guests have obligations as well as privileges.

Herakles would rather not obtrude upon his friend's grief. Despite his appeal to his host's situation, Herakles is, perforce, put into a position in which, as the man-servant sees it (747 sqq.), he can only fail to carry out these obligations, and so he is judged harshly for not observing the σωφροσύνη required by the circumstances. His actions are construed as disregard of the *timē* due Admetos in the circumstances (761-762); and the slave wonders if he is not right in despising the stranger (771-772)³. As φίλος, on the other hand, Herakles has certain privileges: *φιλία* entails the sharing of grief, and this is made explicit by the chorus (369-370). Its own claim to *φιλία* has been recognised, and its special concern for the plight of Admetos and Alkestis acknowledged, at 209-212. But a similar participation, with full knowledge of the circumstances of the *oikos*, is denied Herakles, though he is admitted to

¹ For the justice of Admetos' treatment of Pheres, see Burnett, pp. 248-249. What Admetos says to Pheres demonstrates that one obligation entails another (cf. above, n. 4, p. 59), that Pheres' limited view of responsibility is no foundation for relationship or community, and so is without value.

² For *timē* in the relationship between Admetos and Pheres, cf. 658-660: οὐ μὲν ἐρεῖς γέ μ' ὥς ἀτιμάζοντα σὸν / γῆρας θανεῖν προύδωκας, ὅστις αἰδόφρων / πρὸς σ' ἡ μάλιστα.

³ ἄρα τὸν ξένον / στυγῶ δικαίως...;

its bosom as a guest, and so is more intimate with it, in a way, even than those who εὖ φρονούσι κοιράνοις. Both the chorus on his behalf, speaking in this case with special authority, and Herakles himself assert the claims of φιλία, and protest the violation of the relationship by Admetos (561-562; 1008sq.). Admetos seeks to defend himself, in part, by denying that he meant ἀτίζειν Herakles (1037) —confirmation of the point made to the chorus at 566-567.

On the other hand, Apollo, having been ξένος to Admetos (8), justifies what Thanatos calls ἐκδικῶν behaviour by appealing to the demand of φιλία that he share in the troubles of Admetos (42). The basis of φιλία between Apollo and Admetos is, in part at least, the ὁσιότης they have in common (10), and presumably Admetos' ὁσιότης revealed itself in his kindly and hospitable treatment of the god¹. Now the case of Admetos in respect of τὸ 'πεπρωμένον is a special one (cf. above, p. 52). Here is its justification; it is his ὁσιότης, his hospitableness that guarantees his ultimate superiority over τύχη². But with the death of Alkestis the new lot of Admetos is turning awry. To straighten its course requires, formally, the reversal of his ξενία as he practises it toward Herakles, and, morally, a new insight into the terms of life. The two conditions are together realised by Herakles.

Admetos has not been perfectly punctilious in his observation of the sacredness of ξενία in regard to Herakles (1147-1148). Herakles' deception of Admetos might be seen as a friendly retaliation for the initial deception —both carried out with the best of intentions³. But Herakles' deception is more than an amicable game. It is a test of the man who had denied the reality of his wife's death, who had represented that death to Herakles as of little consequence, but who is now compelled to admit the force of his circumstances⁴. The relationships within the household have been rearranged, however unsatisfactorily, since the

¹ For ὁσιος in this connection, see *Kyklops* 125; see J. Rudhardt, *Notions fondamentales de la pensée religieuse et actes constitutifs du culte dans la Grèce classique*, Geneva 1958, p. 31.

² See W. C. Greene, *Moirai, Fate, Good, and Evil in Greek Thought*, Cambridge, Mass., 1944, p. 197. Being ὁσιος can be such a guarantee: Thukydides V 104 (with Gomme-Andrewes-Dover *ad loc.*). For the dramatic point here, see below, pp. 66, 71; Steidle, pp. 145-146.

³ Much emphasis falls on φίλον πρὸς ἄνδρα (1008).

⁴ It is a test: a) in the matter of marriage, which Alkestis had asked Admetos not to consider, but which Herakles puts forward as a cure for grief (1087); b) in the matter of Admetos' yielding to the importunate demands of φιλία as put forward by Herakles, whereas before he had taken no proper account of Herakles. See also Burnett, *Catastrophe*, pp. 45-46.

death of Alkestis, and there is no room in the οἶκος for one who, despite —indeed, because of— her physical resemblance to Alkestis¹, cannot be, as Alkestis became, mother and father as well as wife to Admetos. And, after all, Admetos had promised that the only substitute would be a statue. Now his deceptive denial of death is unmasked, and he is faced with a more potent and threatening replacement than a statue, which might have been taken as a sign of his devoted remembering of Alkestis.

In eliciting the confession, Herakles' duplicity is a natural consequence of his discovery of the truth from the man-servant and of his decision to act; and that decision is explicitly said to be prompted by χάρις (840sq.). Herakles has been presented to us as willing to accept the necessities of his lot (479sq.)², and his actions in doing so show up, under the special circumstances of divine intervention in the course of human life, the inadequacy of the chorus' gnomic wisdom, which, however, may be valuable as παραινέσις when things are more normal. But just as the wisdom of the chorus seeks to convey something of the terms of living, so too (on a different level) does the action of Herakles. It is entailed, in part, by his recognition of the powerful demands of φιλία; the validation in action of φιλία brings home to Admetos a sense of the inadequacy of his βίος as to φιλία and χάρις in particular.

Admetos had denied completely the traditions and usages of the house as hospitable, to respect the death of Alkestis, and when Herakles arrived he was treated hospitably, to be sure, but the hospitality he enjoyed was solitary. His drunken singing in his party of one created a counterpoint with the only song now properly permitted in Admetos' house, the threnody for Alkestis (760-763), the only expression of community now being, not festive, but funereal³. On the restoration of

¹ 1061sq. Here Alkestis wins back, without Admetos' fully intending it, at least the identity of name: cf. Rivier, *Essai*, p. 37, n. 1. The veiled woman is the promised statue brought to life: with 1061-1067 cf. 348-349 and 352. So it is permissible for Admetos to yield, so far as loyalty to Alkestis goes. Burnett, p. 254, n. 10 (*Catastrophe*, p. 36, n. 14) has important observations to make on the complex «death, simulacra, resurrection, and marriage».

² This modifies, by anticipation, the presentation of the satyric Herakles, the reveller and the glutton with a ready-made (but, as it turns out, all too apt) «philosophy of life». We know, by then, that the Herakles reprobed by the servant is not the only Herakles; and what he says to the servant is more than simply a justification of his revelry, it is a counter to Pheres' evaluation of life (Burnett, pp. 252-253). Glutton and hero are played off in a suggestive way also in the scene culminating in 1152 with Herakles' obedience to the urgency of this heroic task, and so to the ἀνάγκη whose working has been part of the intellectual framework of the play.

³ Festivity and mourning balance Admetos' reminiscences and his present experience at 915-925.

Alkestis Admetos reinstates proper usage by inviting Herakles to be συνέστις and by commanding communal celebration (1151sq.). The balance between domestic and public roles has, along with the right claims of φιλία (cf. 1148), been restored.

The force of that restoration can perhaps be seen more clearly if we consider the claims of ξενία as Euripides presents them. These claims are more open to calculation, it seems, on Admetos' part than are those of his relationship with Alkestis. Herakles, having failed to persuade by a statement of politeness and consideration for others, refers to what is αἰσχροὺν in an attempt to limit the demands that a guest might properly impose on a host (540, 542). But Admetos dismisses Herakles' protest by adducing a purely practical consideration, as if it were potent against the αἰσχροὺν —standard (543)¹, and he merely ignores Herakles' appeal to χάρις. While he explicitly acknowledges, despite all that, the force of one aspect of Herakles' argument (548-550), he effectively cuts his guest off, as we have seen (above, p. 64), from participation in the affairs of the household. The closing-off of the ξενῶνες effects and is at the same time a symbol of the evasion practised by Admetos.

Now his subterfuge, condemned by the chorus as an act of μωρία (551-552), is defended by him on the general grounds of expediency (553-560). Elsewhere, reduction of the significance of his actions to the merely expedient redounds to his discredit (699-701; 720). Here, however, his point (555-556) is reminiscent of Archilochos 13 W. in its suggestion that dismissal of a guest who must be properly entertained will not alleviate a man's συμφορὰ. The chorus elsewhere urges moderation of grief on the ground that excessive lamentation does nothing for the dead. Admetos in effect reverses the argument, and his point, although it misses the nub of the moral issue concerning ξενία, has much practical force. He looks to the totality of his own circumstances (ignoring Herakles'), and can use Alkestis' sentiments (381, 387) to justify his reception of Herakles (541)². That justification is licit to the extent that Alkestis had meant her words to console Admetos³, and to

¹ It is true enough that Admetos eventually translates αἰσχροὺν into αἰδώς (601) and «piety» (605), at least as far as the chorus is concerned (Steidle, p. 147); but, for all that, Herakles' position does leave Admetos open to censure from both Herakles and the chorus. For αἰδώς in the play, see L. Bergson, *Die Relativität der Werte im Frühwerk des Euripides*, Stockholm 1971, p. 52sq.

² οὐδὲν ἔσθ' ὁ κατθανὼν (381), ὡς οὐκέτ' οὐσαν οὐδὲν ἂν λέγοις ἐμέ (387), cf. τεθνήσκιν οἱ θανόντες (541).

³ On consolation at 381, see Paduano, p. 54.

the extent that her dying for him was not meant to deprive him of the exercise of a quality that gave his life meaning and renown¹. But Pheres, by ignoring the special terms of Apollo's dispensation, extends the circumstances to an infinite series for the future, illicitly, but with some moral effectiveness, for it turns upon Admetos' head the charge of φιλοψυχία implicit in what he had said to his father, and it suggests an equation of marriage with expediency (cf. 627-628).

Nonetheless, Admetos succeeds in maintaining the affective bond particularly since for him Alkestis' demonstration of φιλία is worthy of σέβας (279; cf. chorus at 995-999), and in her is bound up his whole life. Upon φιλία is based the solidarity of the conjugal union; the break caused by Alkestis' death is only temporary, and the couple will, as Admetos hopes, resume their united existence when Admetos too dies, in a recreation of the οἶκος that transcends death (363sq.; cf. above, p. 62). Furthermore, each acknowledges, in opposition to Pheres and even, at one point, to Herakles, that τέρψις is conditional upon personal relationship (287-290; 343-347 and 356, on the illusory τέρψις of the statue and of the dream-appearances of Alkestis). Finally, having asserted, to deceive Herakles, that the dead woman was ὀθνεῖος, ἄλλως δ' ἦν ἀναγκαία δόμος, Admetos discovers the true meaning of ἀναγκαία².

Herakles acknowledges, and approves, the fact that in rejecting the woman Admetos, φίλος of Alkestis, is also πιστός (1095; cf. also 1081). But the relationship of Herakles' urgings to Admetos' perceived situation is more complex: the chorus had called Admetos' reception of Herakles, contrary to the propriety of grief, an act of μωρία; having found out the deception involved in his reception, Herakles declares, not without commendation, that devotion to a grief that excludes marriage (in the context, reunion with Alkestis) is μωρία (1093). Admetos receives the stranger only under protest, out of deference to the demands of φιλία; he abrogates what is only expedient. He resists strongly: death becomes now not simply a nullification of a wretched life but a means of securing loyalty to Alkestis (1096). But the handing-over of Alkestis, homologous to the handing-over of the children to Admetos³, cancels the necessity of that act of sacrifice designed to secure the wholeness of the οἶκος under pressure of loss. And so, having passed

¹ See Rivier, *MH*, 1973, p. 133.

² See Paduano, p. 105.

³ Steidle, p. 138, observes the parallel, and the contrast. Burnett, p. 247 (and *Catastrophe*, pp. 39-40) shows that the reception parallels the reception of Apollo and that of Herakles, and shows how φιλία operates in each case.

the test, Admetos finds, beyond all hope and calculation (for he had reckoned only on being reunited with her in death) ¹, his «love» restored to him (1133), and his *oikos* reintegrated.

VIIa

Before Admetos' attack on him and his own narrowing of the focus of *φιλία*, Pheres had held Alkestis up as the ideal of a marriage advantageous to men; but that assessment is mocked by his own situation and by the arguments he adduces against dying for another. The view of the chorus is similar to Pheres' first: Alkestis' action has set up a new ideal, transcending (and so, however, diminishing) the individual case, of marriage (473). What the chorus does not fully reckon is that marriage destroyed Alkestis (179-180) ².

Admetos himself yearns for the undoing of the ties that have saved him. Better never to have married than to have married and lost (879-887) ³. Better to give to Hades two *ψυχαί* than one, even if that one's death was the condition of salvation for the other; at least then the bond of marriage would have been intact, in death (901) ⁴; that is preferable to surviving alone in grief, conscious of the obligations incurred in this marriage.

Consistently, Pheres, the chorus, and Admetos (and even Alkestis herself) load marriage, as an expression of a human relationship, with a greater burden than it can bear, and so they show, in different ways, the impossibility of the kind of *χάρης* expected by Alkestis and of the kind of *φιλία* represented by her. Ultimately, her sacrifice, *qua* sacrifice, makes little sense to the others. Pheres appears opportunistic and cynical in his estimation of the *φιλία* demonstrated by Alkestis, and in his reduction of the sacrifice to the possibility of a mere *τέχνη* by which Admetos might live forever (699-701), a reduction that denies her uniqueness ⁵. The chorus is limited by its application of traditional wisdom in circumstances to which it is not adequate, and Admetos misvalues *φιλία* and

¹ Discussion of the motif: Paduano, pp. 84-91.

² Reading, with mss. and most editors, *μόνην*. I follow Rivier, *MH*, 1972, p. 134, in taking *μόνην* to separate Alkestis from Admetos and the children: she dies, and she alone, and so saves the *oikos*.

³ On the bitterness of the irony of the myth, see Rohdich, p. 37; also Paduano, p. 117.

⁴ With *πιστοτάτης* (901) cf. 1095; and for the general sentiment, cf. 363sqq.

⁵ Paduano, p. 28.

undercuts his own position and that of Alkestis, and only late does he come to true recognition of what his relationships mean.

By accepting the gift of Apollo, Admetos escapes his own death but brings on suffering; by offering herself as victim, Alkestis makes her death inevitable¹. Alkestis appreciates what her sacrifice costs her; she is aware of the worth of human ties that bind her to life and which justify it; and her demonstration of this (280sq.) suggests ironically that in dying for Admetos she values these ties more highly than he does, for all his practical appeal to them. Her death justifies her life; but Admetos' life is not justified, only laid open to scrutiny, by his clinging to it at the cost demanded. That scrutiny, however, leads to insight².

It is a function of irony to «point the significance of the situation»³. Smith has shown how the structure, compounded of ironies, sustains a representation of obligations forgotten, of mistaken interpretation of experience, and of the fallibility of human intention and the inability to reckon consequences. Men are ignorant of their τύχαι and of the part played by the gods, and they have no way of telling how these τύχαι will turn out; moreover, Admetos especially is unaware of the conditions of life. A very great irony resides in the fact that Admetos, entertaining Herakles in the house of mourning, opens the way for the restoration of Alkestis. Here, consequences unforeseen are unimaginably better than expected. The death of Alkestis had brought consequences uncalculated by Admetos. Expectations and suffering are linked closely to the relationships that form the moral world. The theme of the unpredictability and the variability of man's lot recurs in the exodos⁴, but, though the exodos is true to part of the play, with regard to the difficulty of judging experience, it does not comment with satisfactory completeness on its entirety. The last word is inadequate. Whose account of experience, that uttered in words by the chorus or that realised in choice and suffering by Admetos, is to be preferred?

When the chorus counsels (as do others) Admetos to accept what fortune brings, they seem to assume that there is some kind of relationship, certain but inscrutable, between τύχη and the gods. The com-

¹ For the force of this point, see Lesky, *GS*, p. 293.

² This is powerfully argued especially by H. Dörrie, *NJbb*, 1939, p. 174sq.; Garzya, p. 16sq.; cf. also Lesky, *GS*, p. 292.

³ G. G. Sedgewick, *Of Irony, especially in Drama*, Toronto 1935, p. 63.

⁴ The words of the exodos occur also in *Andromache*, *Helene* and *Bakchai*, and, with modification, *Medeia*. They are most appropriate here, but, as Barrett (on *Hippolytos* 1462-1466) points out, «if four instances are spurious, obviously the fifth may be as well». Still, not much of my argument depends on the authenticity of the lines.

plexities of any such relationship as it might have been conceived in the fifth century are not, to be sure, in spite of the role of Apollo, laid open in this play. Its ultimate irony is that the conditions under which Admetos came to a realisation of the terms of life are cancelled by the rescue of Alkestis. That rescue was, indeed, the object of Apollo's concerns. But the dramatic reversal, enhanced by the deception played by Herakles, has quite another purpose than the pointing-up of the role of the gods, and Euripides does not use it to attach the moral meaning of the play to a view of the gods. The structure of the play is too close to the folk-tale for that ¹.

The situation is, however, one which the chorus and others interpret in terms of *τύχη* and of man's obligations to his natural lot ², and in which the chorus seeks comfort by appeal to *τλημοσύνη* and *καρτερία*, to the prescriptions of traditional wisdom. Up to a point, it is right: death for each is inevitable in its moral demands. Admetos attempts, with some struggle, to live by that wisdom; but he ultimately also moves beyond it to a sharper (because experienced, as the chorus' is not) ³, if perhaps inarticulate (1082), perception of the terms and conditions of life. Pheres and the chorus assist herein, each in his own way, by offering interpretations of the death of Alkestis against which Admetos can measure his own lot. Herakles, too, offers conventional gnomic advice (to the man-servant; but it is applicable also to Admetos). But he supplements it with action; he accepts, simply and as a matter of the logic of his own experience, the dispensation of the gods for himself and also (though he is not aware of this) for Admetos and Alkestis. From his action, impelled by obligation, comes Admetos' insight, not into the role of the gods and the nature of *τύχη* as a dynamic force, but into the human factors that operate within the bounds of *τύχη*, into *χάρης* and *φιλία* and *ξενία*.

We are given an ironical disjuncture between the role of Apollo and his particularising intervention on behalf of Admetos, on the one hand, and, on the other, recognition by the chorus of a universal *τύχη*, of whose workings Admetos is only the most recent illustration. As we have seen, the chorus tends to reduce the fate of Alkestis, and so also, by implication, the sufferings of Admetos, to a ready-made, traditional

¹ Conacher, pp. 333-335 and 339.

² On the use of *ὀφείλειν*, etc., see Greene (above, n. 2, p. 65), pp. 407-408.

³ Especially relevant here are 903 sqq., where the experience of grief is reported at second-hand by the chorus. The point is made, with indirect reference to the chorus' advice *καρτερεῖν*, in a different way by Admetos himself in reply to Herakles: *ῥᾷον παραιθεῖν ἢ παθόντα καρτερεῖν* (1078).

pattern, authenticated by σοφία. That is, of course, one way, and usually an effective and true one, to harmonize the sufferer, who in the felt uniqueness of his grief thinks himself indeed unique and alone, with the common lot. But here it fails to take account of the search for a surrogate in death.

VIIb

Whereas the chorus is critical of Admetos' offer to Herakles of hospitality, it is just this hospitality, a demonstration of φιλία in action, that provides the means whereby, in the view of the spectator at least, the sentiments concerning vicissitude are deprived of much of their epistemological and theological import. This case, created by Apollo, is just not as the chorus thinks. It is true that chorus' last piece of advice to Admetos, a repetition of its advocacy of καρτερία, in fact is followed by his recognition and acceptance of Alkestis (1071). But the enactment of the advice, its validation, is, in a way, gratuitous, for the chorus utters it in complete ignorance of who the veiled woman can be¹. And it is true that the chorus expresses a new opinion concerning Admetos' φιλοξενία after his reception of Herakles (569sq.); this is based primarily, not on Admetos' preceding defence of his decision, but rather on reminiscence of Apollo and on application to the present case of a lesson learned from the entertaining of that god. But though the chorus here does look to the particulars of Admetos' case, this new appraisal is not enough, by itself, to compel the traditional σοφία of the chorus to meet all the facts of a situation to which its παραινέσις cannot be adequate. Finally, the chorus had asserted that words and medicaments avail nothing as φάρμακον against ἀνάγκη (see above, p. 51); but action, in this case, is such a φάρμακον. It takes Herakles to show that there is more than one way to domesticate death, to overcome the frailties of man's lot.

Alkestis had tried, too: her comments at 295sq. hint at the possibility of a life free from grief. Pheres takes up the theme (699-701); but the savage irony of his claim not only points up the absurdity of any such proceeding as that envisaged for Admetos by him but also suggests the impracticality of purchasing life at all at the cost of another's death. So too the slave-woman inverts, by anticipation, Alkestis' point when she observes (197-198) that by living Admetos has never-ending ἄλγος.

¹ Cf. P. Masqueray, *De tragica ambiguitate apud Euripidem*, Paris 1895, p. 16.

That observation and Alkestis' comments are grounded on no generalised truism; they spring from the immediate grief. In fact, the dramatic and thematic structure of the play is in great part designed to show the ironical truths (differing, but not contradictory) of what the attendant and Pheres suggest, and the futility of what Alkestis had hoped for. She may overcome destiny by her inner powers and by her dignity that has its source in her courage and innocence, and rewrite the rules at the moment of death so as to win εὐκλεία. But Admetos' inability to accept his own death, to live his life within the bounds that are set for each man and not impinge upon others, reveals an incapacity to be master of himself. Alkestis cannot liberate her husband from the necessity of pain, nor from the exigencies of grief; he himself, with fine irony, sees that her death is happier, because free of μόχθος and ἄλγος, than his life, who was to have been freed from death by her (935sq.).

The natural lot is, marvellously, overcome¹; but the iron laws of morality are unbent. Herakles speaks not only for what is suprahuman but also for what is inherently and individually human, for a true evaluation, within the accepted framework of the mortal condition, of relationships as entailing φιλία and χάρις. Alkestis had lived, and died, by these, to no avail. But Herakles redeems them, and it is these, properly constituted, and Alkestis' innocence that triumph at last².

At the end, the chorus' vision of the regularity of the universe, as manifested in the necessity of suffering and grief, has been modified to embrace the possibility of the unexpected, and their recognition that there is a measure of freedom for the gods in the operation of such laws as have been subsumed under ἀνάγκη and the like stands as a correction of their earlier views. It is not a criticism, nor is the correction elaborated or allowed to occupy the centre of our focus: the tag is not all-inclusive, nor much more than a bow to the forces active in the background of the situation. Yet we have now seen that the chorus was right, in principle, in its insistence upon the naturalness of grief and suffering; it only misapplied the axiom.

The uniqueness of Alkestis' case, subverted by others but recognised by Herakles, is celebrated in the final scene between host and guest:

¹ For ways in which a dramatic choice, once made, can nevertheless be unmade, see R. Lattimore, *Story-Patterns in Greek Tragedy*, Ann Arbor 1964, pp. 41-42.

² I do not mean that Admetos simply deserves to win back Alkestis for his generosity to Herakles. The function of χάρις is more general than that, because it involves also Alkestis herself and is a constituent of relationships as such. For Alkestis as the ultimate victor over ἀνάγκη and τύχη, see Rohdich, pp. 28-29.

only Alkestis can be given, and only Herakles can give her, to Admetos¹. Celebrated also, in the concealment, is the general irony which here, too, in Admetos' veering close to ἀμαρτία, failure to recognise Alkestis, might have been tragic.

But it is not tragic. The irony aims at challenging a view of relationships and obligations that is held by Admetos and, more cynically, by Pheres; and at correcting, rather by raising doubts than by providing answers, a faulty understanding of the links between the natural order and human morality. The play ends with a reintegration and a restoration, with a victory over fate, if not by contingent fortune, then by inherent human worth, and, in the manner of fraudulent comedy, with the promise of festivity.

* * *

The following works are cited by author's name alone (or with abbreviated title where necessary): A. P. Burnett, «The Virtues of Admetus», *CPh* 60, 1965, pp. 240-255; *id.*, *Catastrophe Survived. Euripides' Plays of Mixed Reversal*, Oxford 1971; D. J. Conacher, *Euripidean Drama. Myth, Theme, and Structure*, Toronto 1967; A. M. Dale, *Euripides: Alkestis*, Oxford 1954; K. von Fritz, «Euripides' Alkestis und ihre modernen Nachahmer und Kritiker», *AuA* 3, 1956, pp. 27-69 = *Antike und moderne Tragödie*, Berlin 1962, pp. 256-321; A. Garzya, *Pensiero e tecnica drammatica in Euripide*, Naples 1962; W. Kullmann, «Zum Sinngehalt der euripideischen Alkestis», *AuA* 13, 1967, pp. 127-149; W. Kranz, *Stasimon. Untersuchungen zu Form und Gehalt griechischer Tragödie*, Berlin 1933; A. Lesky, «Alkestis, der Mythos und das Drama», *SBWien* 203, 2, 1925; *id.*, «Der angeklagte Admet», *Maske und Kothurn. Vierteljahrschr. f. Theaterwiss.* 10, 1964, pp. 207-216 = *Gesammelte Schriften*, Bern-Munich 1966, pp. 281-294; *id.*, *Die Tragische Dichtung der Hellenen*, Göttingen 1972₃; G. Paduano, *La Formazione del mondo di Euripide*, Pisa 1968; M. Pohlenz, *Die griechische Tragödie*, Göttingen 1954₂; A. Rivier, «En marge d'Alceste et de quelques interprétations récentes», *MH* 29, 1972, pp. 124-140 and *MH* 30, 1973, pp. 130-143; *id.*, *Essai sur le tragique d'Euripide*, Paris 1975; H. Rohdich, *Die euripideische Tragödie. Untersuchungen zu ihrer Tragik*, Heidelberg 1968; J. Schmitt, *Freiwilliger Opfertod bei Euripides* (RGVV 17, 2), Giessen 1921; W. Steidle, *Studien zum antiken Drama*, Munich 1968; H. Strohm, *Euripides. Interpretationen zur dramatischen Form* (Zetemata 15), Munich 1957; W. D. Smith, «The Ironic Structure in Alkestis», *Phoenix*

¹ This aspect of the play is handled from a different, and useful, standpoint by Vicenzi, pp. 523-524.

14, 1960, pp. 127-145; L. von Weber, *Euripides' Alkestis*, Leipzig 1930; *id.*, «Die Alkestissage», *RhM* 85, 1936, pp. 117sqq.; O. Vicenzi, «Alkestis und Admetos. Versuch einer Euripidesinterpretation», *Gymnasium* 67, 1960, pp. 517-533; W. Zuercher, *Die Darstellung des Menschen im Drama des Euripides*, Basel 1947.

J. M. BELL