

Alcestis

By Euripides

Written 438 B.C.E

Translated by Richard Aldington
Adapted by STC

Dramatis Personae

APOLLO
DEATH
CHORUS OF OLD MEN
LEADER
A WOMAN SERVANT
ALCESTIS, the Queen, wife of ADMETUS
ADMETUS, King of Thessaly
HERACLES
PHERES, father of ADMETUS

Scene

At Pherae, outside the Palace of ADMETUS, King of Thessaly. The centre of the scene represents a portico with columns and a large double-door. To the left are the women's quarters, to the right the guest rooms. The centre doors of the Palace slowly open inwards, and Apollo comes out. In his left hand he carries a large unstrung golden bow. He moves slowly and majestically, turns, and raises his right hand in salutation to the Palace.

APOLLO

Dwelling of Admetus, wherein I, a God, deigned to accept the food of serfs!

The cause was Zeus. He struck Asclepius, my son, full in the breast with a bolt of thunder, and laid him dead. Then in wild rage I slew the Cyclopes who forge the fire of Zeus. To atone for this my Father forced me to labour as a hireling for a mortal man; and I came to this country, and tended oxen for my host. To this hour I have protected him and his. I, who am just, chanced on the son of Pheres, a just man, whom I have saved from Death by tricking the Fates. The Goddesses pledged me their faith Admetus should escape immediate death if, in exchange, another corpse were given to the Under-Gods.

One by one he tested all his friends, and even his father and the old mother who had brought him forth-and found none that would die for him and never more behold the light of day, save only his wife. Now, her spirit waiting to break loose, she droops upon his arm within the house; this is the day when she must die and render up her life.

But I must leave this Palace's dear roof, for fear pollution soil me in the house.

See! Death, Lord of All the Dead, now comes to lead her to the house of Hades! Most punctually he comes! How well he marked the day she had to die!

From the right comes DEATH, with a drawn sword in his hand. He moves stealthily towards the Palace; then sees APOLLO and halts abruptly. The two Deities confront each other.

DEATH

Ha! Phoebus! You! Before this Palace! Lawlessly would you grasp, abolish the rights of the Lower Gods! Did you not beguile the Fates and snatch Admetus from the grave? Does not that suffice? Now, once again, you have armed your hand with the bow, to guard the daughter of Pelias who must die in her husband's stead!

APOLLO

Fear not! I hold for right, and proffer you just words.

DEATH

If you hold for right, why then your bow?

APOLLO

My custom is ever to carry it.

DEATH

Yes! And you use it unjustly to aid this house!

APOLLO

I grieve for a friend's woe.

DEATH

So you would rob me of a second body?

APOLLO

Not by force I won the other.

DEATH

Why, then, is he in the world and not below the ground?

APOLLO

In his stead he gives his wife-whom you have come to take.

DEATH

And shall take-to the Underworld below the earth!

APOLLO

Take her, and go! I know not if I can persuade you...

DEATH

Not to kill her I must kill? I am appointed to that task.

APOLLO

No, no! But to delay death for those about to die.

DEATH

I hear your words and guess your wish!

APOLLO

May not Alcestis live to old age?

DEATH

No! I also prize my rights!

APOLLO

Yet at most you win one life.

DEATH

They who die young yield me a greater prize.

APOLLO

If she dies old, the burial will be richer.

DEATH

Phoebus, that argument favours the rich.

APOLLO

What! Are you witty unawares?

DEATH

The rich would gladly pay to die old.

APOLLO

So you will not grant me this favour?

DEATH

Not I! You know my nature.

APOLLO

Yes! Hateful to men and a horror to the gods!

DEATH

You cannot always have more than your due.

APOLLO

Yet you shall change, most cruel though you are! For a man comes to the dwelling of Pheres, sent by Eurystheus to fetch a horse-drawn chariot from the harsh-wintered lands of Thrace; and he shall be a guest in the house of Admetus, and by force shall he tear this woman from you. Thus shall you gain no thanks from us, and yet you shall do this thing-and my hatred be upon you

APOLLO goes out. DEATH gazes after him derisively.

DEATH

Talk all you will, you get no more of me! The woman shall go down to the dwelling of Hades. Now must I go to consecrate her for the sacrifice with this sword; for when once this blade has shorn the victim's hair, then he is sacred to the Lower Gods!

DEATH enters the Palace by the open main door. The CHORUS enters from the right. They are the Elders or Notables of the city, and, therefore move slowly, leaning upon their staffs.

LEADER OF THE CHORUS *chanting*

Why is there no sound outside the Palace? Why is the dwelling of Admetus silent? Not a friend here to tell me if I must weep for a dead Queen or whether she lives and looks upon the light, Alcestis, the daughter of Pelias, whom among all women I hold the best wife to her spouse!

CHORUS *Singing*

Is a sob to be heard?
Or the beating of hands
In the house?
The lament for her end?
Not one,
Not one of her servants
Stands at the gate!

Ah! to roll back the wave of our woe,
O Healer,
Appear!

FIRST SEMI-CHORUS

Were she dead
They had not been silent.

SECOND SEMI-CHORUS

She is but a dead body!

FIRST SEMI-CHORUS

Yet she has not departed the house.

SECOND SEMI-CHORUS

Ah! Let me not boast!
Why do you cling to hope?

FIRST SEMI-CHORUS

Would Admetus bury her solitary,
Make a grave alone for a wife so dear?

CHORUS

At the gate I see not
The lustral water from the spring
Which stands at the gates of the dead!
No shorn tress in the portal
Laid in lament for the dead!
The young women beat not their hands!

SECOND SEMI-CHORUS

Yet to-day is the day appointed....

FIRST SEMI-CHORUS

Ah! What have you said?

SECOND SEMI-CHORUS

When she must descend under earth

FIRST SEMI-CHORUS

You have pierced my soul!
You have pierced my mind!

SECOND SEMI-CHORUS

He that for long
Has been held in esteem
Must weep when the good are destroyed.

CHORUS

No!
There is no place on earth
To send forth a suppliant ship-
Not to Lycia,
Not to Ammon's waterless shrine-
To save her from death!
The dreadful doom is at hand.
To what laden altar of what God
Shall I turn my steps?

He alone-
If the light yet shone for his eye-
Asclepius, Phoebus's son,
Could have led her back
From the land of shadows,
From the gates of Hades,

For he raised the dead
Ere the Zeus-driven shaft
Slew him with thunder fire....
But now
What hope can I hold for her life?

LEADER *chanting*

The King has fulfilled
Every rite;
The altars of all the Gods
Drip with the blood of slain beasts:
Nothing, nothing avails.

From the women's quarters in the left wing of the Palace comes a woman in tears. She is not a slave, but one of the personal attendants on the Queen.

But now from the house comes one of her women servants, all in tears. What now shall I learn?

To the weeping Servant

It is well to weep when our lords are in sorrow-but tell us, we would know, is she alive, is she dead?

SERVANT

You may say she is both alive and dead.

LEADER

How can the same man be dead and yet behold the light?

SERVANT

She gasps, she is on the verge of death.

LEADER

Ah, unhappy man! For such a husband what loss is such a wife!

SERVANT

The King will not know his loss until he suffers it.

LEADER

Then there is no hope that her life may be saved?

SERVANT

The fated day constrains her.

LEADER

Are all things befitting prepared for her?

SERVANT

The robes in which her lord will bury her are ready.

LEADER

Then let her know that she dies gloriously, the best of women beneath the sun by far!

SERVANT

How should she not be the best! Who shall deny it? What should the best among women be? How better might a woman hold faith to her lord than gladly to die for him? This the whole city knows, but you will marvel when you hear what she has done within the house. When she knew that the last of her days was come she bathed her white body in river water, she took garments and gems from her rooms of cedar wood, and clad herself nobly; then, standing before the hearth-shrine, she uttered this prayer:

'O Goddess, since now I must descend beneath the earth, for the last time I make supplication to you: and entreat you to protect my motherless children. Wed my son to a fair bride, and my daughter to a noble husband. Let not my children die untimely, as I their mother am destroyed, but grant that they live out happy lives with good fortune in their own land!'

To every altar in Admetus's house she went, hung them with garlands. offered prayer, cut myrtle boughs-unweeping, unlamenting; nor did the coming doom change the bright colour of her face.

Then to her marriage-room she went, flung herself down upon her bed, and wept, and said:

'O my marriage-bed, wherein I loosed my virgin girdle to him for whom I die! Farewell! I have no hatred for you. Only me you lose. Because I held my faith to you and to my lord-I must die. Another woman shall possess you, not more chaste indeed than I, more fortunate perhaps.'

She fell upon her knees and kissed it, and all the bed was damp with the, tide of tears which flooded to her eyes. And when she was fulfilled of many tears, drooping she rose from her bed and made as if to go, and many times she turned to go and many times turned back, and flung herself once more upon the bed.

Her children clung to their mother's dress, and wept; and she clasped them in her arms and kissed them turn by turn, as a dying woman.

All the servants in the house wept with compassion for their Queen, But she held out her hand to each, and there was none so base to whom she did not speak, and who did not reply again.

Such is the misery in Admetus's house. If he had died, he would be nothing now; and, having escaped, he suffers an agony he will never forget.

LEADER

And does Admetus lament this woe-since he must be robbed of so noble a woman?

SERVANT

He weeps, and clasps in his arms his dear bedfellow, and cries to her not to abandon him, asking impossible things. For she pines, and is wasted by sickness. She falls away, a frail

burden on his arm; and yet, though faintly, she still breathes, still strives to look upon the sunlight, which she shall never see hereafter-since now for the last time she looks upon the orb and splendour of the sun. I go, and shall announce that you are here; for all men are not so well-minded to their lords as loyally to stand near them in misfortunes, but you for long have been a friend to both my lords.

She goes back into the women's quarters of the Palace. The CHORUS now begins to sing.

FIRST SEMI-CHORUS

O Zeus,
What end to these woes?
What escape from the Fate
Which oppresses our lords?

SECOND SEMI-CHORUS

Will none come forth?
Must I shear my hair?
Must we wrap ourselves
In black mourning folds?

FIRST SEMI-CHORUS

It is certain, O friends, it is certain?
But still let us cry to the Gods;
Very great is the power of the Gods.

CHORUS

O King, O Healer,
Seek out appeasement
To Admetus's agony!
Grant this, Oh, grant it!
Once before did you find it;
Now once more
Be the Releaser from death.
The Restrainer of blood-drenched Hades!

SECOND SEMI-CHORUS

Alas!
O son of Pheres.
What ills shall you suffer
Being robbed of your spouse!

FIRST SEMI-CHORUS

At sight of such woes
Shall we cut our throats?
Shall we slip
A dangling noose round our necks?

CHORUS

See! See!
She comes
From the house with her lord!
Cry out, Oh, lament.
O land of Pherae,
For the best of women
Fades away in her doom
Under the earth,
To dark Hades!

From the central door of the Palace comes a splendid but tragical procession. Preceded by the royal guards, ADMETUS enters, supporting ALCESTIS. The two children, a boy and a girl, cling to their mother's dress. There is a train of attendants and waiting women, who bring a low throne for the fainting ALCESTIS.

LEADER OF THE CHORUS *chanting*

Never shall I say that we ought to rejoice in marriage, but rather weep; this have I seen from of old and now I look upon the fate of the King, who loses the best of wives, and henceforth until the end his life shall be intolerable.

ALCESTIS *chanting*

Sun, and you, light of day,
Vast whirlings of swift cloud!

ADMETUS

The sun looks upon you and me, both of us miserable, who have wrought nothing against the Gods to deserve death.

ALCESTIS *chanting*

O Earth, O roof-tree of my home,
Bridal-bed of my country, Iolcus!

ADMETUS

Rouse up, O unhappy one, and, do not leave me! Call upon the mighty Gods to pity!

ALCESTIS *starting up and gazing wildly in terror, chanting*

I see the two-oared boat,
I see the boat on the lake!
And Charon,
Ferryman of the Dead,
Calls to me, his hand on the oar:
'Why linger? Hasten! You delay me!'
Angrily he urges me.

ADMETUS

Alas! How bitter to me is that ferrying of which you speak! O my unhappy one, how we suffer!

ALCESTIS *chanting*

He drags me, he drags me away-
Do you not see?-
To the House of the Dead,
The Winged One
Glaring under dark brows,
Hades!-
What is it you do?
Set me free!-
What a path must I travel,
O most hapless of women!

ADMETUS

O piteous to those that love you, above all to me and to these children who sorrow in this common grief!

ALCESTIS *chanting*

Loose me, Oh, loose me now;
Lay me down;
All strength is gone from my feet.

She falls back in the throne.

Hades draws near!
Dark night falls on my eyes,
My children, my children,
Never more, Oh, never more
Shall your mother be yours!
O children, farewell,
Live happy in the light of day!

ADMETUS *chanting*

Alas! I hear this unhappy speech, and for me it is worse than all death. Ah! By the Gods, do not abandon me! Ah! By our children, whom you leave motherless, take heart! If you die, I become as nothing; in you we have our life and death; we revere your love.

ALCESTIS *recovering herself*

Admetus, you see the things I suffer; and now before I die I mean to tell you what I wish.

To show you honour and-at the cost of my life-that you may still behold the light, I die; and yet I might have lived and wedded any in Thessaly I chose, and dwelt with happiness in a royal home. But, torn from you, I would not live with fatherless children, nor have I hoarded up those gifts of youth in which I found delight. Yet he who begot you, she who brought you forth, abandoned you when it had been beautiful in them to die, beautiful to die with dignity to save their son! They had no child but you, no hope if you were dead that other children might be born to them. Thus I should have lived my life out, and you too, and you would not lament as now, made solitary from your wife, that you must rear our children motherless!

But these things are a God's doing and are thus.

Well! Do not forget this gift, for I shall ask-not a recompense, since nothing is more precious than life, but-only what is just, as you yourself will say, since if you have not lost your senses you must love these children no less than I. Let them be masters in my house; marry not again, and set a stepmother over them, a woman harsher than I, who in her jealousy will lift her hand against my children and yours. Ah! not this, let not this be, I entreat you! The new stepmother hates the first wife's children, the viper itself is not more cruel. The son indeed finds a strong rampart in his father-but you, my daughter, how shall you live your virgin life out in happiness? How will you fare with your father's new wife? Ah! Let her not cast evil report upon you and thus wreck your marriage in the height of your youth! You will have no mother, O my child, to give you in marriage, to comfort you in childbed when none is tenderer than a mother!

And I must die. Not to-morrow. nor to-morrow's morrow comes this misfortune on me, but even now I shall be named with those that are no more. Farewell! Live happy! You, my husband, may boast you had the best of wives; and you, my children, that you lost the best of mothers!

She falls back.

LEADER

Take heart! I do not hesitate to speak for him. This he will do, unless he has lost his senses.

ADMETUS

It shall be so, it shall be! Have no fear! And since I held you living as my wife, so, when dead, you only shall be called my wife, and in your place no bride of Thessaly shall salute me hers; no other woman is noble enough for that, no other indeed so beautiful of face. My children shall suffice me; I pray the Gods I may enjoy them, since you we have not enjoyed.

I shall wear mourning for you, O my wife, not for one year but all my days, abhorring the woman who bore me, hating my father-for they loved me in words, not deeds. But you-to save my life you give the dearest thing you have! Should I not weep then, losing such a wife as you?

I shall make an end of merry drinking parties, and of flower-crowned feasts and of the music which possessed my house. Never again shall I touch the lyre, never again shall I raise my spirits to sing to the flute-for you have taken from me all my joy. Your image, carved by the skilled hands of artists, shall be laid in our marriage-bed; I shall clasp it, and my hands shall cling to it and I shall speak your name and so, not having you, shall think I have my dear wife in my arms-a cold delight, I know, but it will lighten the burden of my days. Often you will gladden me, appearing in my dreams; for sweet it is to look on those we love in dreams, however brief the night.

Ah! If I had the tongue and song of Orpheus so that I might charm Demeter's Daughter or her Lord, and snatch you back from Hades, would go down to hell; and neither Pluto's dog nor Charon, Leader of the Dead, should hinder me until I had brought your life back to the light!

At least await me there whenever I shall die, and prepare the house where you will dwell with me. I shall lay a solemn charge upon these children to stretch me in the same cedar shroud

with you, and lay my side against your side; for even in death let me not be separate from you, you who alone were faithful to me!

LEADER *to ADMETUS*

And I also will keep this sad mourning with you, as a friend with a friend; for she is worthy of it.

ALCESTIS

O my children, you have heard your father say that never will he set another wife over you and never thus insult me.

ADMETUS

Again I say it, and will perform it too!

ALCESTIS *placing the children's hands in his*
Then take these children from my hand.

ADMETUS

I take them-dear gifts from a dear hand.

ALCESTIS

Now you must be the mother for me to my children.

ADMETUS

It must be so, since they are robbed of you.

ALCESTIS

O children, I should have lived my life out-and I go to the Underworld.

ADMETUS

Alas! What shall I do, left alone by you?

ALCESTIS

Time will console you. The dead are nothing.

ADMETUS

Take me with you, by the Gods! Take me to the Underworld!

ALCESTIS

It is enough that I should die-for you.

ADMETUS

O Fate, what a wife you steal from me!

ALCESTIS *growing faint*

My dimmed eyes are heavily oppressed.

ADMETUS

O woman, I am lost if you leave me!

ALCESTIS

You may say of me that I am nothing.

ADMETUS

Lift up your head! Do not abandon your children!

ALCESTIS

Ah! Indeed it is unwillingly-but, farewell, my children!

ADMETUS

Look at them, look....

ALCESTIS

I am nothing.

ADMETUS

What are you doing? Are you leaving me?

ALCESTIS *falling back dead*

Farewell.

ADMETUS *staring at the body*

Wretch that I am, I am lost!

LEADER

She is gone! The wife of Admetus is no more.

Their oldest child Eumelus cries out to his dead mother

LEADER

She hears not, she sees not. Eumelus and Admetus are smitten by a dread calamity. The mother and wife have passed to Hades and Admetus, you must endure this calamity. You are not the first and will not be the last to lose a noble wife. We all are doomed to die.

ADMETUS

I know it.

Not unawares did this woe swoop down on me; for long it has gnawed at me.

But, since I shall ordain the funeral rites for this dead body, you must be there, and meanwhile let a threnody re-echo to the implacable God of the Underworld. And all you men of Thessaly whom I rule-I order you to share the mourning for this woman with severed hair and black-robed garb. You who yoke the four-horsed chariot and the swift single horses, cut the mane from their necks with your steel.

Let there be no noise of flutes or lyre within the city until twelve moons are fulfilled. Never shall I bury another body so dear to me, never one that has loved me better. From me she deserves all honour, since she alone would die for me!

The body of ALCESTIS is carried solemnly into the Palace, followed by ADMETUS, With bowed head, holding one of his children by each hand. When all have entered, the great doors are quietly shut.

CHORUS *singing*
strophe 1

O Daughter of Pelias,
Hail to you in the house of Hades,
In the sunless home where you shall dwell!
Let Hades, the dark-haired God,
Let the old man, Leader of the Dead,
Who sits at the oar and helm,
Know you:
Far, far off is the best of women
Borne beyond the flood of Acheron
In the two-oared boat!

antistrophe 1

Often shall the Muses' servants
Sing of you to the seven-toned
Lyre-shell of the mountain-tortoise,
And praise you with mourning songs at Sparta
When the circling season
Brings back the month Carneius
Under the nightlong upraised moon,
And in bright glad Athens.
Such a theme do you leave by your death
For the music of singers!

strophe 2

Ah! That I had the power
To bring you back to the light
From the dark halls of Hades,
And from the waves of Cocytus
With the oar of the river of hell

Oh, you only,
O dearest of women,
You only dared give your life
For the life of your lord in Hades!
Light rest the earth above you,
O woman.
If your lord choose another bridal-bed
He shall be hateful to me
As to your own children.

antistrophe 2

When his mother
And the old father that begot him
Would not give their bodies to the earth
For their son's sake,
They dared not deliver him-O cruel!
Though their heads were grey.
But you,
In your lively youth,
Died for him, and are gone from the light!
Ah! might I be joined
With a wife so dear!
But in life such fortune is rare.
How happy were my days with her!

From the left HERACLES enters. He is black-bearded and of great physical strength; he wears a lion-skin over his shoulders and carries a large club.

HERACLES *with a gesture of salutation*

Friends, dwellers in the lands of Pherae, do I find Admetus in his home?

LEADER OF THE CHORUS

The son of Pheres is in his home, O Heracles. But, tell us, what brings you to the land of Thessaly and to the city of Pherae?

HERACLES

I have a task I must achieve for Eurystheus of Tiryns.

LEADER

Where do you go? To what quest are you yoked?

HERACLES

The quest of the four-horsed chariot of Diomedes, the Thracian.

LEADER

But how will you achieve it? Do you know this stranger?

HERACLES

No, I have never been to the land of the Bistones.

LEADER

You cannot obtain the horses without a struggle.

HERACLES

I cannot renounce my labours.

LEADER

You must kill to return, or you will remain there dead.

HERACLES

It will not be the first contest I have risked.

LEADER

And if you conquer the King will you gain anything?

HERACLES

I shall bring back his foals to the lord of Tiryns.

LEADER

It is not easy to thrust the bit into their jaws.

HERACLES

Only if they breathe fire from their nostrils!

LEADER

But they tear men with their swift jaws.

HERACLES

You speak of the food of wild mountain beasts, not of horses.

LEADER

You may see their mangers foul with blood.

HERACLES

Of what father does the breeder boast himself the son?

LEADER

Of Ares, the lord of the gold-rich shield of Thrace!

HERACLES

In this task once more you remind me of my fate, which is ever upon harsh steep ways, since I must join battle with the sons of Ares-first with Lycaon, then with Cynus, and now in this third contest I am come to match myself with these steeds and their master!

LEADER

But see, the lord of this land, Admetus himself, comes from the house!

The central doors of the Palace have opened, and ADMETUS comes slowly on the Stage, preceded and followed by guards and attendants. The King has put off all symbols of royalty, and is dressed in black. His long hair is clipped close to his head. ADMETUS dissembles his grief throughout this scene, in obedience to the laws of hospitality, which were particularly revered in Thessaly.

ADMETUS

Hail Son of Zeus and of the blood of Perseus!

HERACLES

And hail to you, Admetus, lord of the Thessalians

ADMETUS

May it be so! I know your friendship well.

HERACLES

What means this shorn hair, this mourning robe?

ADMETUS

To-day I must bury a dead body.

HERACLES

May a God avert harm from your children!

ADMETUS

The children I have begotten are alive in the house.

HERACLES

Your father was ripe for death-if it is he has gone?

ADMETUS

He lives-and she who brought me forth, O Heracles.

HERACLES

Your wife-Alcestis-she is not dead?

ADMETUS *evasively*

Of her I might make a double answer.

HERACLES

Do you mean that she is dead or alive?

ADMETUS *ambiguously*
She is and is not-and for this I grieve.

HERACLES *perplexed*
I am no wiser-you speak obscurely.

ADMETUS
Did you not know the fate which must befall her?

HERACLES
I know she submitted to die for you.

ADMETUS
How then can she be alive, having consented to this?

HERACLES
Ah! Do not weep for your wife till that time comes.

ADMETUS
Those who are about to die are dead, and the dead are nothing.

HERACLES
Men hold that to be and not to be are different things.

ADMETUS
You hold for one, Heracles, and I for the other.

HERACLES
Whom, then, do you mourn? Which of your friends is dead?

ADMETUS
A woman. We spoke of her just now.

HERACLES *mistaking his meaning*
A stranger? Or one born of your kin?

ADMETUS
A stranger, but one related to this house.

HERACLES
But how, then, did she chance to die in your house?

ADMETUS
When her father died she was sheltered here.

HERACLES

Alas! Would I had not found you in this grief, Admetus!

ADMETUS

What plan are you weaving with those words?

HERACLES

I shall go to the hearth of another friend.

ADMETUS

Not so, O King! This wrong must not be.

HERACLES *hesitating*

The coming of a guest is troublesome to those who mourn.

ADMETUS *decisively*

The dead are dead. Enter my house.

HERACLES

But it is shameful to feast among weeping friends.

ADMETUS

We shall put you in the guest-rooms, which are far apart.

HERACLES

Let me go, and I will give you a thousand thanks.

ADMETUS

No, you shall not go to another man's hearth.

To a servant

Guide him, and open for him the guest-rooms apart from the house.

HERACLES enters the Palace by the guests' door; when he has gone in, ADMETUS turns to the other servants

Close the inner door of the courtyard; it is unseemly that guests rejoicing at table should hear lamentations, and be saddened.

The attendants go into the Palace.

LEADER

What are you about? When such a calamity has fallen upon you, Admetus, have you the heart to entertain a guest? Are you mad?

ADMETUS

And if I had driven away a guest who came to my house and city, would you have praised me more? No, indeed! My misfortune would have been no less, and I inhospitable. One more ill

would have been added to those I have if my house were called inhospitable. I myself find him the best of hosts when I enter the thirsty land of Argos.

LEADER

But why did you hide from him the fate that has befallen, if the man came as a friend, as you say?

ADMETUS

Never would he have entered my house if he had guessed my misfortune.

To some, I know, I shall appear senseless in doing this, and they will blame me; but my roof knows not to reject or insult a guest.

He goes into the Palace, as the CHORUS begins its song.

CHORUS *singing*
strophe 1

O house of a bountiful lord,
Ever open to many guests,
The God of Pytho,
Apollo of the beautiful lyre,
Deigned to dwell in you
And to live a shepherd in your lands!
On the slope of the hillsides
He played melodies of mating
On the Pipes of Pan to his herds.

antistrophe 1

And the dappled lynxes fed with them
In joy at your singing;
From the wooded vale of Orthrys
Came a yellow troop of lions;
To the sound of your lyre, Apollo,
Danced the dappled fawn
Moving on light feet
Beyond the high-crested pines,
Charmed by your sweet singing.

strophe 2

He dwells in a home most rich in flocks
By the lovely moving Boebian lake.
At the dark stabling-place of the Sun
He takes the sky of the Molossians
As a bourne to his ploughing of fields,
To the soils of his plains;
He bears sway
As far as the harbourless

Coast of the Aegean Sea,
As far as Pelion.

antistrophe 2

Even to-day he opened his house
And received a guest,
Though his eyelids were wet
With tears wept by the corpse
Of a dear bedfellow dead in the house.
For the noble spirit is proclaimed by honour;
All wisdom lies with the good.
I admire him:
And in my soul I know
The devout man shall have joy.

The funeral procession of ALCESTIS enters from the door of the women's quarters. The body, carried on a bier by men servants, is followed by ADMETUS and his two children. Behind them comes a train of attendants and servants carrying the funeral offerings. All are in mourning. ADMETUS addresses the CHORUS.

ADMETUS

O friendly presence of you men of Pherae! Now that the body is prepared, and the servants bear it on high to the tomb and the fire, do you, as is fitting, salute the dead as she goes forth on her last journey.

PHERES, the father of ADMETUS, enters, followed by attendants bearing funeral offerings.

LEADER OF THE CHORUS

But I see your father, tottering with an old man's walk, and his followers bearing in their hands for your wife garments as an offering to the dead.

PHERES

My son, I have come to share your sorrow, for the wife you have lost was indeed noble and virtuous-none can deny it. But these things must be endured, however intolerable they may be.

Take these garments, and let her descend under the earth. Her body must be honoured, for she died to save your life, my son;

He lifts his hand in salutation to the body of ALCESTIS.

O woman, who saved my son, who raised me up when I had fallen, hail! Be happy in the halls of Hades

ADMETUS *furiously*

It was not my wish that you should come to this burial, and I deny that your presence is that of a friend! She shall never wear these garments of yours; she needs not your gifts for her burial. You should have grieved when I was, about to die; but you stood aside, and now do you come to wail over a corpse when you, an old man, allowed a young woman to die?

Were you in very truth father of this body of mine? Did she, who claims to be and is called

my mother, bring me forth? Or was I bred of a slave's seed and secretly brought to your wife's breast? You have proved what you are when it comes to the test, and therefore I am not your begotten son; or you surpass all men in cowardice, for, being at the very verge and end of life, you had neither courage nor will to die for your son. But this you left to a woman, a stranger, whom alone I hold as my father and my mother!

Yet it had been a beautiful deed in you to die for your son, and short indeed was the time left you to live. She and I would have lived out our lives, and I should not now be here alone lamenting my misery.

You enjoyed all that a happy man can enjoy-you passed the flower of your age as a king, and in me your son you had an heir to your dominion; you would not have died childless, leaving an orphaned house to be plundered by strangers. You will not say that you abandoned me to death because I dishonoured your old age, for above all I was respectful to you-and this is the gratitude I have from you and my mother!

Beget more sons, and quickly, to cherish your old age and wrap you in a shroud when dead and lay your body out in state! This hand of mine shall not inter you. I am dead to you. I look upon the light of day because another saved me-I say I am her son, and will cherish her old age!

Vainly do old men pray for death, regretting their age and the long span of life. If death draws near, none wants to die, and age is no more a burden to him.

LEADER

Admetus! The present misfortune is enough. Do not provoke your father's spirit.

ADMETUS turns angrily to depart, but PHERES prevents him.

PHERES

My son, do you think you are pursuing some hireling Lydian or Phrygian with your taunts? Do you know I am a Thessalian, a free man lawfully begotten by a Thessalian father? You are over-insolent, and you shall not leave thus, after wounding me with your boyish insults. I indeed begot you, and bred you up to be lord of this land, but I am not bound to die for you. It is not a law of our ancestors or of Hellas that the fathers should die for the children! You were born to live your own life, whether miserable or fortunate; and what is due to you from me you have. You rule over many men, and I shall leave you many wide fields even as received them from my own father. How, then, have I wronged you? Of what have I robbed you? Do not die for me, any more than I die for you. You love to look upon the light of day-do you think your father hates it? I tell myself that we are a long time underground and that life is short, but sweet.

But you-you strove shamelessly not to die, and you are alive, you shirked your fate by killing her! And you call me a coward, you, the worst of cowards, surpassed by a woman who died for you, pretty boy? And now you insult those who should be dear to you, when they refuse to die for a coward like you!

Be silent! Learn that if you love your life, so do others. If you utter insults, you shall hear many, and true ones too!

LEADER

These insults and those that went before suffice. Old man, cease to revile your son.

ADMETUS *to PHERES*

Speak on! I shall refute you. If the truth wounds you when you hear it you should not have wronged me.

PHERES

I should have wronged you far more if I had died for you.

ADMETUS

It is the same then to die an old man and in the flower of life?

PHERES

We should live one life, not two.

ADMETUS

May you live longer than God!

PHERES

Do you curse your parents when they have done you no wrong?

ADMETUS

I see you are in love with long life.

PHERES

But you are not carrying her dead body in place of your own?

ADMETUS

It is the proof of your cowardice, O worst of men.

PHERES

You cannot say she died for me!

ADMETUS

Alas! May you one day need my help.

PHERES

Woo many women, so that more may die for you.

ADMETUS

To your shame be it-you who dared not die.

PHERES

Sweet is the daylight of the Gods, very sweet.

ADMETUS

Your spirit is mean, not a man's.

PHERES

Would you laugh to carry an old man's body to the grave?

ADMETUS

You will die infamous, whenever you die.

PHERES

It will matter little enough to me to hear ill of myself when I am dead!

ADMETUS

Alas! Alas! full of impudence. is old age!

PHERES

She was not impudent, but foolish,

ADMETUS

Go! Leave me to bury her body.

PHERES *turning away*

I go. You, her murderer, will bury her-but soon you must render an account to her relatives. Acastus is not a man if he fails to avenge his sister's blood on you!

PHERES goes out by the way he entered, followed by his attendants. ADMETUS gazes angrily after him.

ADMETUS

Go with a curse, you, and she who dwells with you! Grow old, as you ought, childless though you have a child. You shall never return to this house. And if I could renounce your hearth as my father's by heralds, I would do it. But we-since this sorrow must be endured-let us go, and set her body on the funeral pyre.

The Procession moves slowly along the stage, and is joined by the CHORUS. As they pass, the LEADER salutes the body of ALCESTIS.

LEADER *chanting*

Alas! Alas! You who suffer for your courage, O noblest and best of women, hail! May Hermes of the Dead, may Hades, greet you kindly. If there are rewards for the dead, may you share them as you sit by the bride of the Lord of the Dead!

The Procession has filed out. A servant in mourning hurries out from the guests' quarters.

SERVANT

Many guests from every land, I know, have come to the Palace of Admetus, and I have set food before them, but never one worse than this guest have I welcomed to the hearth.

First, though he saw our Lord was in mourning, he entered, and dared to pass through the gates. Then, knowing our misfortune, he did not soberly accept what was offered him, but if anything was not served to him he ordered us to bring it. In both hands he took a cup of ivy-wood, and drank the unmixed wine of the dark grape-mother, until he was encompassed and heated with the flame of wine. He crowned his head with myrtle sprays, howling discordant songs. There was he caring nothing for Admetus's misery, and we servants weeping for our Queen; and yet we hid our tear-laden eyes from the guest, for so Admetus had commanded.

And now in the Palace I must entertain this stranger, some villainous thief and brigand, while she, the Queen I mourn, has gone from the house unfollowed, unsaluted, she who was as a mother to me and all us servants, for she sheltered us from a myriad troubles by softening her husband's wrath.

Am I not right, then, to hate this stranger, who came to us in the midst of sorrow?

HERACLES comes from the Palace. He is drunkenly merry, with a myrtle wreath on his head, and a large cup and wine-skin in his hands. He staggers a little.

HERACLES

Hey, you! Why so solemn and anxious? A servant should not be sullen with guests, but greet them with a cheerful heart.

You see before you a man who is your lord's friend, and you greet him with a gloomy, frowning face, because of your zeal about a strange woman's death. Come here, and let me make you a little wiser!

With drunken gravity

Know the nature of human life? Don't think you do. You couldn't. Listen to me. All mortals must die. Isn't one who knows if he'll be alive to-morrow morning. Who knows where Fortune will lead? Nobody can teach it. Nobody learn it by rules. So, rejoice in what you hear, and learn from me! Count each day as it comes as Life-and leave the rest to Fortune. Above all, honour the Love Goddess, sweetest of all the Gods to mortal men, a kindly goddess! Put all the rest aside. Trust in what I say, if you think I speak truth-as I believe. Get rid of this gloom, rise superior to Fortune. Crown yourself with flowers and drink with me, won't you? I know the regular clink of the wine-cup will row you from darkness and gloom to another haven. Mortals should think mortal thoughts. To all solemn and frowning men, life I say is not life, but a disaster.

SERVANT

We know all that, but what we endure here to-day is far indeed from gladness and laughter.

HERACLES

But the dead woman was a stranger. Lament not overmuch, then, for the Lords of this Palace are still alive.

SERVANT

How, alive? Do you not know the misery of this house?

HERACLES

Your lord did not lie to me?

SERVANT

He goes too far in hospitality!

HERACLES

But why should I suffer for a stranger's death?

SERVANT

It touches this house only too nearly.

HERACLES

Did he hide some misfortune from me?

SERVANT

Go in peace! The miseries of our lords concern us.

HERACLES

That speech does not imply mourning for a stranger!

SERVANT

No, or I should not have been disgusted to see you drinking.

HERACLES

Have I then been basely treated by my host?

SERVANT

You did not come to this house at a welcome hour. We are in mourning. You see my head is shaved and the black garments I wear.

HERACLES

But who, then, is dead? One of the children? The old father?

SERVANT

O stranger, Admetus no longer has a wife.

HERACLES

What! And yet I was received in this way?

SERVANT

He was ashamed to send you away from his house.

HERACLES

O hapless one! What a wife you have lost!

SERVANT

Not she alone, but all of us are lost.

HERACLES *now completely sobered*

I felt there was something when I saw his tear-wet eyes, his shaven head, his distracted look. But he persuaded me he was taking the body of a stranger to the grave. Against my will I entered these aches, and drank in the home of this generous man-and he in such grief! And shall I drink at such a time with garlands of flowers on my head? You, why did you not tell me that such misery had come upon this house? Where is he burying her? Where shall I find him?

SERVANT

Beside the straight road which leads to Larissa you will see a tomb of polished stone outside the walls.

Returns to the servants' quarters

HERACLES

O heart of me, much-enduring heart, O right arm, now indeed must you show what son was born to Zeus by Alcmena, the Tirynthian, daughter of Electryon! For I must save this dead woman, and bring back Alcestis to this house as a grace to Admetus.

I shall watch for Death, the black-robed Lord of the Dead, and I know I shall find him near the tomb, drinking the blood of the sacrifices. If he can leap upon him from an ambush, seize him, grasp him in my arms, no power in the world shall tear his bruised sides from me until he has yielded up this woman. If I miss my prey, if he does not come near the bleeding sacrifice, I will go down to Kore and her lord in their sunless dwelling, and I will make my entreaty to them, and I know they will give me Alcestis to bring back to the hands of the host who welcomed me, who did not repulse me from his house, though he was smitten with heavy woe which most nobly he hid from me! Where would be a warmer welcome in Thessaly or in all the dwellings of Hellas?

He shall not say he was generous to an ingrate!

HERACLES goes out. Presently ADMETUS and his attendants, followed by the CHORUS, return from the burial of ALCESTIS.

ADMETUS *chanting*

Alas!

Hateful approach, hateful sight of my widowed house! Oh me! Oh me! Alas! Whither shall I go? Where rest? What can I say? What refrain from saying? Why can I not die? Indeed my mother bore me for a hapless fate. I envy the dead, I long to be with them, theirs are the dwellings where I would be. Without pleasure I look upon the light of day and set my feet upon the earth-so precious a hostage has Death taken from me to deliver unto Hades!

CHORUS *chanting responsively with ADMETUS*

Go forward,
Enter your house.

ADMETUS

Alas!

CHORUS

Your grief deserves our tears.

ADMETUS

O Gods!

CHORUS

I know you have entered into sorrow.

ADMETUS

Woe! Woe!

CHORUS

Yet you bring no aid to the dead.

ADMETUS

Oh me! Oh me!

CHORUS

Heavy shall it be for you
Never to look again
On the face of the woman you love.

ADMETUS

You bring to my mind the grief that breaks my heart. What sorrow is worse for a man than the loss of such a woman? I would I had never married, never shared my house with her. I envy the wifeless and the childless. They live but one life-what is suffering to them? But the sickness of children, bridal-beds ravished by Death-dreadful! when we might be wifeless and childless to the end.

CHORUS

Chance, dreadful Chance, has stricken you.

ADMETUS

Alas!

CHORUS

But you set no limit to your grief.

ADMETUS

Ah! Gods!

CHORUS

A heavy burden to bear, and yet...

ADMETUS

Woe! Woe!

CHORUS

Courage! You are not the first to lose...

ADMETUS

Oh me! Oh me!

CHORUS

A wife.

Different men

Fate crushes with different blows.

ADMETUS

O long grief and mourning for those beloved under the earth!

Why did you stay me from casting myself into the hollow grave to lie down for ever in death by the best of women? Two lives, not one, had then been seized by Hades, most faithful one to the other; and together we should have crossed the lake of the Underworld.

CHORUS

A son most worthy of tears

Was lost to one of my house,

Yet, childless, he suffered with courage,

Though the white was thick in his hair

And his days were far-spent!

ADMETUS

O visage of my house! How shall I enter you? How shall I dwell in you, now that Fate has turned its face from me? How great is the change! Once, of old, I entered my house with marriage-songs and the torches of Pelion, holding a loved woman by the hand, followed by a merry crowd shouting good wishes to her who is dead and to me, because we had joined our lives, being both noble and born of noble lines. Today, in place of marriage-songs are lamentations; instead of white garments I am clad in mourning, to return to my house and a solitary bed.

CHORUS

Grief has fallen upon you

In the midst of a happy life

Untouched by misfortune.

But your life and your spirit are safe.

She is dead,

She has left your love.

Is this so new?
Ere now many men
Death has severed from wives.

ADMETUS *speaking*

O friends, whatsoever may be thought by others, to me it seems that my wife's fate is happier than mine. Now, no pain ever shall touch her again; she has reached the noble end of all her sufferings. But I, I who should have died, I have escaped my fate, only to drag out a wretched life. Only now do I perceive it.

How shall I summon strength to enter this house? Whom shall I greet? Who will greet me in joy at my coming? Whither shall I turn my steps? I shall be driven forth by solitude when I see my bed widowed of my wife, empty the chairs on which she sat, a dusty floor beneath my roof, my children falling at my knees and calling for their mother, and the servants lamenting for the noble lady lost from the house!

Such will be my life within the house. Without, I shall be driven from marriage-feasts and gatherings of the women of Thessaly. I shall not endure to look upon my wife's friends. Those who hate me will say: 'See how he lives in shame, the man who dared not die, the coward who gave his wife to Hades in his stead! Is that a man? He hates his parents, yet he himself refused to die!'

This evil fame I have added to my other sorrows. O my friends, what then avails it that I live, if I must live in misery and shame?

He covers his head with his robe, and crouches in abject misery on the steps of his Palace.

CHORUS *singing*
strophe 1

I have lived with the Muses
And on lofty heights:
Many doctrines have I learned;
But Fate is above us all.
Nothing avails against Fate
Neither the Thracian tablets
Marked with Orphic symbols,
Nor the herbs given by Phoebus
To the children of Asclepius
To heal men of their sickness.

antistrophe 1

None can come near to her altars,
None worship her statues;
She regards not our sacrifice.
O sacred goddess,
Bear no more hardly upon me
Than in days overpast!
With a gesture Zeus judges,

antistrophe 2

Ah!
Let the grave of your spouse
Be no more counted as a tomb,
But revered as the Gods,
And greeted by all who pass by!
The wanderer shall turn from his path,
Saying: 'She died for her lord;
A blessed spirit she is now.
Hail, O sacred lady, be our friend!'
Thus shall men speak of her.

ADMETUS is still crouched on the Palace steps, when HERACLES enters from the side, leading a veiled woman.

LEADER OF THE CHORUS

But see! The son of Alcmena, as I think, comes to your house.

ADMETUS uncovers his head, and faces the newcomer.

HERACLES

Admetus, a man should speak freely to his friends, and not keep reproaches silent in his heart. Since I was near you in your misfortune, should have wished to show myself your friend. But you did not tell me the dead body was your wife's, and you took me into your house as if you were in mourning only for a stranger. And I put a garland of flowers upon my head, and poured wine-offerings to the Gods, when your house was filled with lamentation. I blame you, yes, I blame you for this-but I will not upbraid you in your misfortune.

Why I turned back and am here, I shall tell you. Take and keep this woman for me until I have slain the King of the Bistones and return here with the horses of Thrace. If ill happens to me-may I return safely!-I give her to you to serve in your house.

With much striving I won her to my hands. On my way I found public games, worthy of athletes, and I have brought back this woman whom I won as the prize of victory. The winners of the easy tests had horses; heads of cattle were given to those who won in boxing and wrestling. Then came a woman as a prize. Since I was present, it would have been shameful for me to miss this glorious gain. Therefore, as I said, you must take care of this woman, whom I bring to you, not as one stolen but as the prize of my efforts. Perhaps in time you will approve of what I do.

ADMETUS

Not from disdain, nor to treat you as a foe, did I conceal my wife's fate from you. But if you had turned aside to another man's hearth, one more grief had been added to my sorrow. It was enough that I should weep my woe.

This woman-O King, I beg it may be thus-enjoin some other Thessalian, one who is not in sorrow, to guard her. In Pherae there are many to welcome you. Do not remind me of my grief. Seeing her in my house, I could not restrain my tears. Add not a further anguish to my pain, for what I suffer is too great. And then-where could I harbour a young woman in my house? For she is young-I see by her clothes and jewels. Could she live with the men under

my roof? How, then, could she remain chaste, if she moved to and fro among the young men? Heracles, it is not easy to restrain the young....I am thinking of your interests....Must I take her to my dead wife's room? How could I endure her to enter that bed? I fear a double reproach-from my people, who would accuse me of betraying my saviour to slip into another woman's bed, and from my dead wife, who deserves my respect, for which I must take care.

O woman, whosoever you may be, you have the form of Alcestis, and your body is like hers.

Ah! By all the Gods, take her from my sight! Do not insult a broken man. When I look upon her-she seems my wife-my heart is torn asunder-tears flow from my eyes. Miserable creature that I am, now taste the bitterness of my sorrow.

LEADER

I do not praise this meeting; but, whatever happens, we must accept the gifts of the Gods.

HERACLES

Oh, that I might bring your wife back into the light of day from the dwelling of the Under-Gods, as a gift of grace to you!

ADMETUS

I know you would wish this-but to what end? The dead cannot return to the light of day.

HERACLES

Do not exaggerate, but bear this with decorum.

ADMETUS

Easier to advise than bear the test.

HERACLES

How will it aid you to lament for ever?

ADMETUS

I know-but my love whirls me away.

HERACLES

Love for the dead leads us to tears.

ADMETUS

I am overwhelmed beyond words.

HERACLES

You have lost a good wife-who denies it?

ADMETUS

So that for me there is no more pleasure in life.

HERACLES

Time will heal this open wound.

ADMETUS

You might say Time, if Time were death!

HERACLES

Another woman, a new marriage, shall console you.

ADMETUS

Oh, hush! What have you said? A thing unbelievable!

HERACLES

What! You will not marry? Your bed will remain widowed?

ADMETUS

No other woman shall ever lie at my side.

HERACLES

Do you think that avails the dead?

ADMETUS

Wherever she may be, I must do her honour.

HERACLES

I praise you-but men will call you mad.

ADMETUS

Yet never more shall I be called a bridegroom.

HERACLES

I praise your faithful love to your wife-

ADMETUS

May I die if I betray her even when dead!

HERACLES *offering him the veiled woman's hand.*

Receive her then into your noble house.

ADMETUS

No, by Zeus who begot you, no!

HERACLES

Yet you will do wrong if you do not take her.

ADMETUS

If I do it, remorse will tear my heart.

HERACLES

Yield-perhaps it will be a good thing for you.

ADMETUS

Ah! If only you had not won her in the contest!

HERACLES

But I conquered-and you conquered with me.

ADMETUS

It is true-but let the woman go hence.

HERACLES

She shall go, if she must. But first-ought she to go?

ADMETUS

She must-unless it would anger you.

HERACLES

There is good reason for my zeal.

ADMETUS

You have conquered then-but not for my pleasure.

HERACLES

One day you will praise me for it-be persuaded.

ADMETUS *to his attendants*

Lead her in, since she must be received in this house.

HERACLES

No, I cannot leave such a woman to servants.

ADMETUS

Then lead her in yourself, if you wish.

HERACLES

I must leave her in your hands.

ADMETUS

I must not touch her-let her go into the house.

HERACLES

I trust only in your right hand.

ADMETUS

O King, you force me to this against my will.

HERACLES

Put forth your hand and take this woman.

ADMETUS *turning aside his head*

It is held out.

HERACLES

As if you were cutting off a Gorgon's head! Do you hold her?

ADMETUS

Yes.

HERACLES

Then keep her. You shall not deny that the son of Zeus is a grateful guest.

Takes off the veil and shows ALCESTIS.

Look at her, and see if she is not like your wife. And may joy put an end to all your sorrow!

ADMETUS *drops her hand and starts back*

O Gods! What am I to say? Unhoped-for wonder! Do I really look upon my wife? Or I am snared in the mockery of a God?

HERACLES

No you look upon your wife indeed.

ADMETUS

Beware! May it not be some phantom from the Underworld?

HERACLES

Do not think your guest a sorcerer.

ADMETUS

But do I indeed look upon the wife I buried?

HERACLES

Yes-but I do not wonder at your mistrust.

ADMETUS

Can I touch, speak to her, as my living wife?

HERACLES

Speak to her-you have all you desired.

ADMETUS *taking ALCESTIS in his arms*

O face and body of the dearest of women! I have you once more, when I thought I should never see you again!

HERACLES

You have her-may the envy of the Gods be averted from you!

ADMETUS

O noble son of greatest Zeus, fortune be yours, and may your Father guard you! But how did you bring her back from the Underworld to the light of day?

HERACLES

By fighting with the spirit who was her master.

ADMETUS

Then did you contend with Death?

HERACLES

I hid by the tomb and leaped upon him.

ADMETUS

But why is she speechless?

HERACLES

You may not hear her voice until she is purified from her consecration to the Lower Gods, and until the third dawn has risen. Lead her in.

And you, Admetus, show as ever a good man's welcome to your guests.

Farewell! I go to further shores for my Labours to perform.