Alcestis

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF EURIPIDES

Alongside Aeschylus and Sophocles, Euripides was one of the great tragic playwrights of classical Greece. He authored more than 90 plays. Little is known of Euripides's early years. He did some acting in his youth, but his voice wasn't strong enough to be successful on the stage, so he focused on becoming a playwright instead. In the classical Greek context, this meant that he produced and directed his plays as well. Euripides took up such themes as justice, the will of the gods, and people's intrinsic merit as opposed to their social status. His plays are characterized by an innovative use of irony, a versatile incorporation of comedic elements, and a reduced role for the gods as characters. Out of his 90 plays, only four won prizes; Aeschylus and Sophocles were far more successful in their own day. However, audiences loved Euripides's storytelling and twists on traditional mythology. Euripides lived his final years in the court of Archelaus, king of Macedon, and died there.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The theatrical genre of tragedy likely emerged in the late 6th century B.C.E. in connection with the ancient Greek cult of Dionysus, the god of the harvest, wine, fertility, and (eventually) the theatre. Dionysian worship involved the wearing of masks, music, and dance—elements which were preserved in later Greek theatre. Tragic plays were performed in open-air theatres and were typically inspired by familiar stories from Greek religion. However, playwrights used these old stories to explore events and issues within contemporary Greek society. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle defined tragedy as having imitative and cathartic aspects: tragedy is "an imitation of a noble and complete action […] which through compassion and fear produces purification of the passions." At first, tragedies were performed by one masked actor and a singing chorus; by Euripides's time, up to three actors were permitted onstage. Also, by Euripides's day, tragedy competitions had become a fixture of religious festivals, such as Athens's famed City Dionysia. Such festivals generally lasted for at least three days and featured three playwrights, each of whom presented three tragedies and one satyr play (a tragicomedy with burlesque elements). A judging panel would select the best play and award the winner a bronze cauldron. Euripides is known to have won the City Dionysia at least three times, and in 438 B.C.E., *Alcestis* took second place.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Other classics of fifth-century Greek tragedy include Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, in which Queen Clytemnestra kills King Agamemnon and his lover upon his return from the Trojan War; Sophocles's *Antigone*, in which Antigone commits suicide after unlawfully burying her brother, a political traitor; and Euripides's *Medea*, in which Medea kills the new wife and children of her husband, mythological hero Jason, after being abandoned by him. Classical Greek tragedies and tragicomedies had wide-ranging influence on more modern works. Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, *The Winter's Tale*, *and The Tempest* can be classified as tragicomic like *Alcestis*. T.S. Eliot's play *The Cocktail Party* (1949), a story about a troubled marriage, adapts elements of *Alcestis*. *Alcestis* was the final play of a tetralogy which included *The Cretan Women*, *Alkmaion in Psophis*, and *Telephos*, but none of these plays has survived.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Alcestis
- **When Written:** 438 B.C.E.
- **Where Written:** Greece
- **When Published:** 438 B.C.E. (first performed)
- **Literary Period:** Classical Greek
- **Genre:** Tragic play
- **Setting:** Pherai, Thessaly, Greece
- **Climax:** Alcestis is unveiled.
- **Antagonist:** Death
- **Point of View:** Third person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Tears of Laughter. Though *Alcestis* has traditionally been classified as a tragedy, it also contains farcical elements (such as Herakles's drunken speech on death) which has led both ancient and modern critics to suggest that it might better fit the genre of "tragicomedy." So, whether it was his intention or not, Euripides can be seen as the pioneer of this genre.

Test of Time. *Alcestis* is typically dated as the earliest of Euripides's extant plays, although at the time it was first performed in Athens in 438 B.C.E., Euripides had been writing and producing plays for almost two decades. In fact, out of the nearly hundred plays he wrote, only about 20 texts survive.

PLOT SUMMARY

In Thessaly, Greece, Apollo is just leaving the palace of King Admetos. Apollo was enslaved there by Zeus, as punishment

for having killed the Cyclopes (in retaliation for Zeus killing Apollo's son). During his sentence, however, Apollo befriended Admetos and even saved him from a fated early death. The Fates require that someone take Admetos's place. His parents refused, but his wife, Alcestis, has agreed to die instead. Before he leaves, Apollo has a brief confrontation with Death, who has just arrived to take Alcestis. Apollo prophesies that a strong man is coming who will defeat Death.

Later, the chorus waits outside the palace, watching for signs that Alcestis has died. Alcestis's maid comes out, and together she and the chorus leader praise Alcestis's courage in the face of death. The maid predicts that Admetos won't understand his loss until it's too late, and then his life will be filled with bitterness.

Soon, Admetos and Alcestis emerge from the palace with their children. Alcestis's life is rapidly fading. Though Admetos begs her to remain, Alcestis bids the household farewell, asks Admetos not to remarry, and commits the children to his care. Admetos not only promises to remain unmarried, but never to allow another woman into his house and to refrain from all festivity for the rest of his life. Alcestis dies, and the servants carry her body away, followed by a grieving Admetos and their children.

While the chorus sings in Alcestis's honor, Admetos's friend Herakles arrives for a visit, on his way to undertake mighty toil in Thrace. Seeing Admetos's mourning, Herakles wants to leave, but Admetos insists that he's mourning a stranger and forces Herakles to stay. Accordingly, Herakles makes himself comfortable in the palace's guest quarters. Admetos defends his action to the chorus leader, explaining that he doesn't want to be thought inhospitable.

Before Alcestis's funeral, Admetos's father, Pheres, brings funeral gifts to honor his daughter-in-law. Admetos is furious, accusing his father of hypocrisy and disloyalty for refusing to die in Admetos's place. He disowns both his parents. In response, Pheres berates his son for arrogance and cowardice, telling him, "Do your own dying. I'll do mine." He storms out with his rejected gifts.

During the funeral, a servant remains at the palace to tend to Herakles, whom he calls "the worst damned / guest this house and I have ever seen." Soon Herakles staggers in, drunk. He gives a tipsy speech about the importance of accepting mortality and enjoying life while we can. The servant finally tells Herakles that the household isn't mourning for a stranger, but for Alcestis. Instantly sober, Herakles plans to go to Alcestis's tomb to wrestle Death into submission and bring Alcestis back to repay Admetos's hospitality.

After the funeral, the chorus tries to comfort Admetos, who is in despair. The chorus points out that Admetos has been lucky, having never known suffering and loss. But everyone must humble themselves to submit to relentless Necessity.

Suddenly Herakles enters, followed by a veiled woman. He rebukes Admetos for hiding the truth about Alcestis's death and not allowing Herakles to share his friend's grief. Then he asks Admetos to house this young woman until Herakles's return from his errand in Thrace. Admetos, remembering his vow to his dying wife and noticing the woman's resemblance to her, tearfully refuses. Failing to gently persuade his friend, Herakles finally seizes Admetos's arm and joins his and the woman's hands. He also lifts the woman's veil, revealing Alcestis, whom he successfully wrestled back from Death. Admetos finally believes what he is seeing and rejoices. Herakles returns to his labors, encouraging Admetos to "treat your guests and those you love / as they deserve." Admetos declares a thanksgiving feast and tells his kingdom, "From this day forth we must remake our lives, / and make them better than they were before."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

King Admetos – Admetos is the King of Thessaly, a small kingdom in northern Greece. He is married to Alcestis. Before the play begins, Admetos is doomed by the Fates to an early death, but his friend and guest, Apollo, tricks the Fates into sparing him. However, someone must die in his place, and Alcestis volunteers. Admetos is plunged into despair at her death and vows never to remarry or even to enjoy his life ever again. Admetos is portrayed as being genuinely hospitable, generous, and a good friend; at the same time, he is also used to getting his way and has never suffered much before, so he can display an entitled, selfish attitude. He misleads his friend Herakles regarding Alcestis's death, but Herakles loyally fights Death and brings Alcestis back from the dead to repay his friend's hospitality. In the process, with the help of the chorus and chorus leader, Admetos realizes that he cannot spend his life dodging death, that love brings suffering, and that he can only know happiness once he accepts mortality. It's only after he has learned these lessons that he and Alcestis are reunited, prompting Admetos to declare a feast and reform his life.

Alcestis – Alcestis is the queen of Thessaly, Admetos's wife. She agrees to die an early death in Admetos's place. She is described as "incomparably a queen," courageous in the face of death, pious before the gods, and a loving, loyal wife. Her husband, children, and servants are devoted to her. She freely chooses to die for Admetos, knowing she could have easily remarried and ruled Thessaly if he had died. For her children's sake, she asks him never to remarry. Throughout the play she is associated with **light**, the symbol of life; the chorus sings that "Death shall not eclipse the glory of your shining." Herakles wrestles and defeats Death at Alcestis's tomb, freeing her from Hades. She and Admetos are joyfully reunited at the end of the play.

Herakles – Herakles is a son of Zeus, half-divine, and Greece's strongest hero. He is compelled by King Eurystheus to perform various difficult labors and is resigned to a life of struggle and fighting. While unerringly faithful to his duty, he also enjoys revelry, as shown by his copious drinking while staying at his friend Admetos's house. While ignorant of Alcestis's death, he drunkenly philosophizes to Admetos's servant about mortality and the importance of enjoying life. As soon as he learns that Alcestis is dead, however, he immediately springs into action, plotting to ambush Death and win Alcestis back from Hades. He succeeds and brings Alcestis, veiled, to the grieving Admetos, coaxing and finally forcing Admetos to recognize and welcome his wife.

Pheres – Pheres is Admetos's elderly father. He and his wife both refuse to die in Admetos's place. He and Admetos have a heated confrontation in the middle of the play, when Pheres brings funeral gifts to honor Alcestis. Admetos angrily rejects Pheres's gifts and calls him a hypocrite and disloyal for having refused to die. Pheres, in turn, condemns Admetos's cowardice and presumption, arguing that while parents give their children life, they are not obligated to die for them.

Apollo – Apollo is a god of the Greek pantheon. He is the deity of a number of things, including prophecy, healing, speech, and **light**. Along with Alcestis, he is associated with the play's prominent symbol of light. At the beginning of the play, he has just been freed from slavery in Admetos's palace, to which he'd been sentenced by Zeus. During his time there, he became Admetos's loyal friend, even tricking the Fates so that Admetos wouldn't be doomed to an early death. Apollo prophesies that Herakles will soon come to defeat Death.

Chorus Leader – The chorus leader represents the chorus as a whole, interacting directly with Admetos and his household. In particular, he praises Alcestis as an incomparable queen and questions the actions of major characters, such as Herakles and especially Admetos. He is an example of a good and loyal friend in the play.

Chorus – The chorus comprises a group of elderly men of Pherai. They have a mediating function between audience and actors in the play, commenting on and providing context for the action. They grieve Alcestis's death, praise Admetos's hospitality, and appeal to Admetos's conscience—such as by pointing out that Admetos must learn to accept suffering and mortality.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Death – Death is personified as a winged, black-clad figure who carries a sword and is always punctual. He is portrayed as sarcastic and insistent upon his rightful due. He mocks Apollo, but as the god predicts, Death is later defeated by Herakles, forcing him to release Alcestis from Hades.

Servant – Admetos's cranky, scowling servant complains about Herakles's rowdy behavior while Herakles is a guest during Alcestis's funeral. After Herakles gives a drunken speech about mortality, the servant informs him of the truth about Alcestis's death.

Maid – Alcestis's loyal maid speaks with the chorus leader before Alcestis's death, reporting Alcestis's brave and pious behavior while preparing to die. She also predicts that Admetos won't understand his loss of Alcestis until it's too late, and that his life will be bitter as a result.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

MORTALITY AND HAPPINESS

In Euripides's *Alcestis*, a tragic play of the fifth century B.C., King Admetos of Thessaly dreads death, resists the reality of it, and exploits others to help him avoid it. At the beginning of the play, the god Apollo explains that Admetos "was doomed to die young, / but I outwitted the Fates and won him a reprieve: / Admetos's day of death might be deferred / if someone else would volunteer to take his place below." Admetos's elderly parents refuse to volunteer; only his wife, Alcestis, is willing to die in his place. Through Admetos's anguished grief over his life without Alcestis, Euripides argues that only by accepting inevitable mortality can human beings overcome their hubris to live happy lives.

Admetos's fear and avoidance of death is rooted in ignorance. As the grieving servants wait for Alcestis to die, the maid wisely predicts, "The master does not know the meaning of his loss. / He will not know, until it is too late." Admetos doesn't yet have the wisdom to understand what his selfish act of avoidance has cost him. When he finds out, it will be too late for the lesson to do him good. Speaking to the chorus leader before Alcestis dies, the maid muses, "What has [Admetos] gained but life? / If he had died, he would have lost Alcestis. / Now, as matters stand, he has lost her anyway. / As long as he lives, his life will have that taste / of pain and loss—a bitterness that lasts." The maid already understands the reality and price of death. Admetos might have "life," but he will spend it reckoning with his foolish loss—ironically, a loss he would have avoided if he'd accepted death on its own terms.

Admetos's fearful efforts to avoid death are rooted in an entitled, prideful lifestyle. Admetos feels entitled to life, no matter what the cost to those he loves. Pheres scolds his son, "You fought like hell to live—life at any price!—/ beyond your

destined time. You only live / because you took her life. You *murdered* her." Admetos has the nerve to accuse Pheres of cowardice for not taking his place, but Admetos forces his wife to face his own greatest fear, rather than bravely accepting the destiny appointed for him. Pheres insinuates that Admetos will do the same thing again. "Immortality is yours, yours for the asking. / All you have to do is wheedle your latest wife / into dying in your place." Pheres strikes a nerve, which no doubt accounts for some of Admetos's fury in disowning his father. If Admetos is to learn that death and life are not his to command, he will have to reorient his life in a fundamental way.

To overcome fear and avoidance of death, Admetos must accept the mysteries and limitations of human existence. Even Admetos's friend Herakles, in his drunken obliviousness, understands death better than Admetos has hitherto done, philosophizing to Admetos's servant: "Well, lissen, mister: / we all gotta die. An' that's a fact. / There's not a man alive who knows the odds on death. / Here today. Gone tomorrow. / Poof. / That's fate. A mystery. I mean, / there's jus' no knowin'. Man can't figger it out." In few, humble words, Herakles sums up the reality of death that his friend has avoided—in the end, it can't be predicted, dodged, or understood. In an exaggerated scene of enjoying life, the tipsy Herakles goes on, "Well, a swallow of [wine] will do wonders, friend, / for whatever's ailing you. / I mean, we all gotta die. Right? / Well, that's why we all gotta think human thoughts, / and live while we can." Herakles knows that, ultimately, there's no understanding death; it's something that every person must face. Therefore, he might as well enjoy life, and "think human thoughts"—accept human limits—which is exactly what Admetos, in his attempt to dodge death, has shown himself unwilling to do. Thus, paradoxically, he can't enjoy life, either.

At Alcestis's funeral, Admetos is confronted by the reality that his life has become a living death. Only when he comes to terms with this anguish is he prepared to welcome his resurrected wife and reorient his life accordingly. Faced with the reality of his loss, Admetos sees that the life he's gained through Alcestis's death really isn't a life at all. Everything he values most now lives in the realm of death, and his earthly home can no longer be his home—even his personal honor is lost. When Herakles presents the veiled Alcestis—whom, unbeknownst to Admetos, he's rescued from the underworld—Admetos sobs, "now, now, for the first time, I know the anguish of my life." Even before he knows it's Alcestis, this familiar, silent figure has a revelatory power for Admetos—he is crushed by the emptiness of the life he has been spared by means of Alcestis's death. After Alcestis is unveiled, the play shifts from tragedy to comedy. Declaring a celebratory feast, Admetos tells his subjects, "From this day forth we must remake our lives, / and make them better than they were before. / Happiness is mine, and now I know it." Until he realized the depths of his tragedy, Admetos couldn't recognize how happy he had truly been. Now, understanding that life can only be lived in acceptance of death, he is able to truly enjoy happiness.

Alcestis, regained from death, has encouraged Admetos to "remake [his] life," as he, too, has gained a second chance at living well. Having come to understand the preciousness of life by starkly facing the reality of loss and inevitable death for the first time, he's finally in a position to fully know happiness. By taking his audience on this journey of fear, grief, and unexpected hope, Euripides encourages people to reorient their lives accordingly.

OBLIGATION, LIMITATIONS, AND FATE

In *Alcestis*, King Admetos is characterized by a stubborn refusal to live within his limits. The results of his defiance of human constraints are devastating; his wife, Alcestis, must submit to death in his place. But the play includes a variety of other examples of characters who accept the obligations and limits on their lives—everyone from Admetos's father, Pheres, to his divine friends Apollo and Herakles, all the way to Death himself. By contrasting various characters' submission to their obligations with Admetos's defiance, Euripides argues that a harmonious life—both for individuals and for the world as a whole—is found only when people recognize and honor the constraints placed upon them by fate.

Even divine figures, despite their immense power, must fulfill obligations. This is made clear from the opening moments of the play, as Apollo describes his slavery, a punishment for retaliating when Zeus killed his son. He is leaving Admetos's house, having endured "what no god should ever be compelled to bear. / Here, with serfs and laborers, I ate the bread of slavery." He accepts this humiliation willingly, an immortal made subservient to a mortal, grateful for the benefit of befriending Admetos in the process. This sets an ironic tone for the rest of the play, as it becomes clear that Admetos, a mortal king, chafes under constraint and will go to great lengths—such as asking his wife to die for him—to escape its obligations.

Death isn't simply a villain; it has his obligations to fulfill, too. Death enters as Apollo leaves Admetos's house, accusing Apollo of "[violating] again the dues and honors / of the gods below." Death is bound by honor, refusing to defer Alcestis's death on the grounds that "The younger my victim, / the more mankind fears me and respects me." When Apollo continues to try to bargain with him, Death reminds him, "Even you must learn a limit, Apollo. You cannot have your way in everything you want." Even the gods, then, are bound by limits. Herakles, son of Zeus and Admetos's dear friend, shows up at Admetos's house around the time of the funeral, on his way to Thrace to capture Diomedes' horses. When the chorus leader asks what brings him to Thessaly, he replies, "Obligation, friend. / I have a labor to perform. / Eurystheus is my master. He commands, and I obey." When the chorus leader replies in disbelief that those

horses can't be broken without a fight, Herakles says matter-of-factly, " […] the story of my labors and my life. It's a damned hard road / I'm doomed to travel, friend. Rough, uphill / all the way." Herakles, in contrast to his friend Admetos, is a character who realistically bears the constraints under which life has bound him. He has work he's commanded to do, and he does it. He admits that his work is hard, but he doesn't try to shirk its claims upon him.

In contrast even to the gods, Admetos, by his refusal to live under the constraints natural to human beings, only perpetuates his own and others' suffering. As Admetos collapses in grief beside his wife's deathbed, the chorus leader consoles him: "It had to be, Admetos. All we can do with death / is bear it patiently. Be brave. […] We were born to die." In other words, death is something that naturally comes to all; Admetos must learn to accept that through suffering the loss of his wife. As he goes to prepare for the funeral, Admetos charges the chorus to sing a funeral song, to "cry defiance to this hard and bitter god / whom nothing will appease but death." Admetos continues to chafe defiantly against the perceived injustice of death's necessity.

When Admetos disowns his father for, as he sees it, failing in his obligation to die for him, Pheres turns on him in anger: "Damn you, boy, / I made you lord and master of this house of mine. / I gave you life, I raised you. / I am not obliged to die for you as well. / Or do you think my father died for me? / There is no law, no precedent, in Greece / that children have a claim upon their fathers' lives." This confrontation between father and son is a climactic moment in the play, as Pheres' words highlight Admetos's entitled expectations of life. Pheres did not expect his own father to die for him; that is not how death works—everyone must grapple with death for themselves.

At Alcestis's funeral, prompted by the admonitions of the chorus, Admetos finally comes to terms with the fact that human beings face obligations and constraints, which necessarily include the acceptance of suffering. The chorus tries to console Admetos: "We cannot choose our fates / A man can fight. But not with life, / not with death. Accept it like a man. […] / Some soon, some late, every man is curbed / by suffering or fate." They go on to say, "Your luck had been good, Admetos. […] So when this sorrow struck so suddenly, it found you unprepared. Suffering was something you had never known." The chorus tells Admetos what he hasn't wanted to hear—that everyone must live under the immoveable constraints of life and death and not expect to avoid suffering by sheer force of will or shifting the burden to someone else. The chorus then sings, "Necessity is stone. / Call her death, compulsion, fate: against / what man her cruelty comes, that man is doomed. / If poets know, if scholars speak the truth, / nothing stronger, nothing more resistless, is." The chorus' words reinforce the point that it isn't only death that Admetos resists, but the whole attitude that he can thwart "necessity" by shaping reality to suit his will. Such an attitude, in fact, dooms a person.

It's only when Admetos grieves at Alcestis's funeral, fully recognizing that the goodness of living he'd clung to is now lost to him, that he bows to necessity and is therefore prepared to live life differently—as a human being subject to limitations. Once Admetos has humbled himself in this way, his friend Herakles embodies "necessity" when he forces Admetos to take the resurrected Alcestis's outstretched hand. This resolution restores things to the way they should be—suggesting that everyone, human and divine, is happiest when they live according to the constraints of obligation and necessity.

HOSPITALITY AND FRIENDSHIP

Hospitality and friendship, cherished virtues in classical Greek society, frame Euripides's *Alcestis*. Protagonist Admetos is a genuinely hospitable man, even winning gods, like long-term guest Apollo, by his kindness. Though his generosity is justly celebrated, Admetos has a confused and self-defeating view of hospitality. This is made worse when, making a series of rash vows before his wife Alcestis's deathbed, Admetos swears he will welcome no guests for a year. This vow creates unintended consequences which prove damaging to the friendship Admetos most needs in his time of grief. Through the illustration of a "bad guest"—Herakles—Euripides shows that hospitality exercised for its own sake risks undermining the very friendships it is meant to sustain.

Admetos undermines hospitality by accepting a guest on dishonest terms. When his newly arrived friend, Herakles, observes that Admetos is dressed in mourning, Admetos makes a tortured evasion, not wanting to upset his friend with news of Alcestis's death and fulfill his rash vow of extended mourning. He pretends to be preemptively mourning his wife's eventual death, and then, changing gears, claims that an acquaintance, a relative stranger, has died. Herakles turns to leave the house of mourning, not wanting to burden them with his visit ("This is a time for mourning, not entertaining friends. / You cannot do both at once."), but Admetos prevails upon him to stay just to make himself feel better. Later, the chorus leader asks if Admetos is mad to have done this. "I have pain enough without the pain / of having my house called inhospitable and rude," he defends himself. The chorus leader perceptively replies, "Your friend, you say. / Then why conceal your sorrow from your friend?" The chorus leader's point is that Admetos is trying to have it both ways. He doesn't want to be seen as inhospitable, but he's not doing his friend the honor of letting him mourn with him, either—thus, in the end, he's not really being hospitable at all.

Herakles's comedic behavior demonstrates the effects of hospitality gone wrong. During Alcestis's funeral, an off-key drinking song is sung in the background. Admetos's servant complains to the audience that Herakles is "the worst damned /

guest this house and I have ever seen." Herakles—a "dull clod" of a guest who should have seen that Admetos was in mourning—barges in anyway, makes himself at home, and freely orders the servants around, enjoying his wine. His behavior demonstrates the negative consequences that hospitality can invite. In reality, Herakles has taken Admetos at his word that he isn't in serious mourning and has made himself comfortable in Admetos's home, the way a true friend would. But Herakles's exaggerated drunkenness, and the servant's annoyance at this "worst" of guests, underscores the point that Herakles has not been properly welcomed; he's been deceived by his friend and thus not enabled to be a proper friend and guest. Regardless of Admetos's intentions, this is the opposite of hospitality.

Though deceived, Herakles demonstrates true friendship by fixing the mess Admetos has created. When he learns that Alcestis is dead, Herakles instantly sobers and leaps into characteristic action: "Now, Herakles, / your great ordeal begins. / Come, o my tough spirit, you hard, enduring hands calloused with my many labors, / come and prove what man I am." "Admetos's love to me was great," he adds, "and it deserves—and it will get—no ordinary kindness / in return." Herakles's immediate, determined reaction to fix things for his grieving friend shows that even wrongheaded, inordinate hospitality, when it's founded on true friendship, deserves to be requited. Rather than dwelling on his friend's deceit and faulty hospitality, Herakles takes the blame for his own breach of propriety and does what he's equipped to do—take Death by surprise and wrestle Alcestis free of Death's clutches.

Herakles not only heals his friend's sorrow, he also guides Admetos back to a proper practice of hospitality—and, in so doing, restores their friendship. When Herakles enters with the veiled girl (Alcestis), he constructs a scene that both confronts Admetos and prepares for the restoration of their friendship. He does this by creating a need for hospitality, knowing his friend's weakness: "As your friend, I thought I had the right / to stand beside you in your hour of need / and prove my loyalty. But you misled me; you deliberately concealed the truth" […] "It was wrong of you, Admetos, wrong, I tell you, / to treat a friend this way. But let it pass. / You have sorrows enough, old friend." Herakles claims he "won" Alcestis as a prize in an athletic contest and asks Admetos to keep the girl in his home until Herakles returns for her after his errand in Thrace. Despite Admetos's resistance, Herakles urges him to exercise hospitality in the right way: "make this woman welcome in your generous house. […] / The courtesy you show this girl / may serve you in your time of need." When Herakles finally unites their hands, he tells Admetos, "you will know your kindness was not wasted / on the son of Zeus, your good friend and grateful guest." Thus Admetos's weakness—inordinate hospitality—is ultimately leveraged as a strength, as Herakles kindly presses his friend to welcome the person who has the greatest of all claims on his hospitality and friendship—his wife.

Ultimately, just as Admetos must develop a humbler attitude about his humanity and mortality, so he must develop a humbler attitude about friendship, too—especially, he must acknowledge that he *needs* friends. This humility, in turn, enables him to be more generous, on a more humane scale, than he's shown before. In leading Admetos to this point, Herakles proves to be even wiser in friendship than he is formidable in defeating Death.

LOYALTY

On the brink of Alcestis's death, the chorus leader describes her as the paragon of loyalty: "In dying and living both: / incomparably a queen. For courage and love / Alcestis has no rival among all women / on this earth." Although Alcestis disappears from the play fairly quickly, her "incomparable" character haunts the play as others deal with the repercussions of her willing self-sacrifice. In particular, her above-and-beyond act of loyalty in dying for Admetos contrasts with Admetos's rejection of even basic loyalty to his father. Euripides uses this stark contrast between Admetos and Alcestis to argue that selfishness, and even the mutual obligations of conventional society, are always overshadowed by self-sacrificing loyalty that can't be repaid.

Alcestis is portrayed as the epitome of love and loyalty. Anticipating Alcestis's death, the maid tells the chorus leader, "What would the woman be who could rival / or surpass Alcestis? What woman ever loved a man so much? / Loved him more than herself? So much more / she gave her life to let him live? In love / she has no equal, sir: the whole world knows it." But there is more to this description than simple idealization of Alcestis. Her love and readiness to die for Admetos set up a contrast between her own active loyalty and her husband's passive acceptance of it. And Alcestis is not a silent sufferer, but a woman who takes initiative and willingly puts others' happiness before her own.

Not only do others recognize Alcestis's consummate loyalty, but, strikingly, Alcestis knows it, too. In her dying speech, Alcestis names her own strength: "I am dying for you, Admetos, / but I did not have to die. / I could have chosen otherwise. As your widow / I might have married any man in Thessaly / and lived with him here and ruled this royal house. / But without you, with these children fatherless, I could not live." Alcestis knows the power of her own choice, and that, had Admetos died as he had been fated to do, she would still have had a chance for a respectable life. For love's sake, though, she willingly surrenders that chance. Alcestis acknowledges that it would have been more "[natural] and right," even glorious, for Admetos's elderly parents to die for him, but they have refused. She doesn't dwell on this, however, accepting that "Some god has brought these things to pass." Alcestis doesn't die timidly or in a self-effacing manner. She recognizes that, by her own free will, she's choosing to do something that's not rightly

demanded of her. She even recognizes that she's in a position to make demands on her bereaved husband. She makes him promise that he won't take a second wife, who will surely not love her children as they deserve.

Alcestis's superlative loyalty contrasts with Admetos's, and even his irascible father's, deficient loyalty. Pheres, whatever his failings, actually shows proper reverence to his late daughter-in-law. As he presents funeral gifts, he says, "We must honor her in death as she deserves; she gave her life to let you keep the **light**. No, she would not let this poor old man drag out his dying years deprived of all he had—his one, his only, son." He gives her a fitting tribute: "this wife of yours was pure gold, and no mistake / And gold is what I give her now." In saying these things, Pheres honors Alcestis's surpassing loyalty to her father-in-law—she didn't allow him to suffer grief, even though it wasn't her job to prevent that. It also shows that Pheres is not devoid of the virtue himself. But Admetos, enraged, throws his father's gestures of loyalty back in his face. After refusing to die for him, he tells Pheres, "now you have the gall to come here with your mock / sorrow and your hypocrisy of love! / You never gave a damn for me! / Where was your love when I needed you?" He angrily disowns his parents for selfishly clinging to their last years of life when they, unlike Alcestis, had nothing to lose.

While Admetos could be correct in his evaluation of his parents, his accusations also reveal his own weak loyalties as a son. He even completely severs the sacred tie of father and son: "Gods, is there any coward in this world like you? / There you were, a withered bag of bones, tottering / into eternity. But still you wouldn't die! […] Well, now your time is running out, old man. / So hurry. Use what little time you've got to breed / another son to care for you in your old age and stuff you in the ground." This tirade further illustrates how much Alcestis surpasses him in loyalty. While Admetos, at minimum, owes his father a respectful burial and rejects this basic filial duty, Alcestis went so far as to give up what was only hers—her life—when no one could lawfully demand it from her. This suggests that Admetos's highest loyalty is really to himself.

The true test of loyalty comes for Admetos when Herakles brings Alcestis, rescued from the underworld, to reunite with her husband. When he hears his friend's insistent vow to never remarry, he says, "I admire you, Admetos. / You are loyal in love." Admetos refuses to admit the veiled woman into his house and only joins hands with Alcestis when forced by Herakles, who then lifts Alcestis's veil. Having passed this test of loyalty and now given a second chance, Admetos is finally free to "remake [his life]…better than [it was] before"—presumably undoing his rash vows and renewing his family relationships on less selfish grounds, as well.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

LIGHT

In *Alcestis*, light symbolizes life. Both before and after Alcestis dies, light is associated both with the longing for life and the despair of life. When the chorus leader characterizes Alcestis as one whose "bravery and love deserve the light," he means that she does not deserve the death she's willingly chosen. As she is dying, Alcestis longs for a last view of the world's light, in contrast to the dark underworld toward which she's headed. In contrast, after Alcestis's funeral, distraught Admetos grieves that he "[hates] the light," meaning he hates his life without Alcestis, and the chorus urges him to hide from the light, as part of accepting the truth of his wife's death. But after she dies, the chorus also associates the light of life with Alcestis herself, anticipating and symbolizing her eventual return from the realm of the dead. For example, in its farewell song for Alcestis, the chorus implores Death to see "blazing in that crowd of ordinary / dead, the noblest life the sunlight ever shone upon! / [Alcestis shines] in memory." The chorus further predicts that each year, in Alcestis's memory, "your song shall rise / a shining on the lips of men / […] Death shall not eclipse the glory of your shining." This prediction proves even truer than the chorus knows, as Herakles wrestles Death to "bring Alcestis back to the light," so the darkness of death cannot eclipse her in the end. Finally, Apollo is the god of light, so his presence as a character alongside Death underscores the ongoing struggle between clinging to life and accepting death that plagues Admetos throughout the play.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Oxford University Press edition of *Alcestis* published in 1990.

Lines 1-40 Quotes

APOLLO: House of Admetos, farewell.
Apollo takes his leave of you,
dear house . . . though it was here that I endured
what no god should ever be compelled to bear.
Here, with serfs and laborers, I ate the bread of slavery.

He turns to the audience.

I do not blame Admetos.
The author of my shame was Zeus. He killed
my son Asklepios, stabbing him through the heart
with his fatal lightning. And I in anger
retaliated. I killed the one-eyed Cyclopes
because they forged for Zeus those blazing bolts
in which my son died. And so,
in punishment, Zeus doomed me,
a god, to this duress,
constraining me to be the bond-slave
of a death-bound man.

Related Characters: Apollo (speaker), King Admetos

Related Themes:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

These are the play's opening lines, as the god Apollo leaves Admetos's house after having served there as a slave. There are two major ironies bound up in Apollo's account. First, the reason Apollo's son, Asklepios, was killed by Zeus is that Asklepios's healing arts brought many people back from the brink of death—the chorus later describes Asklepios as having "[medicined] to life and saved / death-tamed and -broken men"—behavior which Zeus condemned as presumptuous, encroaching on the gods' territory. If Asklepios had lived, he might have been able to save Alcestis from death. Though, of course, if Apollo had not bargained with the Fates for Admetos's escape from doom, then Alcestis would not have faced death to begin with. In addition, the fact that the immortal Apollo willingly humbles himself to be "bond-slave / of a death-bound man" places him in sharp contrast to Admetos himself, who is mortal but refuses to fully accept the fact until the end of the play. In other words, the all-powerful god understands the importance of submitting to constraints better than the mortal human does.

Lines 116-285 Quotes

MAID Sir, the queen is dying. . . .
LEADER Oh, Alcestis, Alcestis!
What a loss. Poor Admetos, how I pity him. . . .
MAID The master does not know the meaning of his loss.
He will not know, until it is too late.
LEADER Nothing can be done to save her?
MAID Nothing. This is the day. Her destiny is too strong,
a force she cannot fight.

Related Characters: Chorus Leader, Maid (speaker), King Admetos , Alcestis

Related Themes:

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

Before Alcestis dies, the chorus huddles outside of Admetos's palace, waiting for news. Finally, Alcestis's faithful maid emerges and tearfully informs them that Alcestis is near death. The maid makes the wise observation that Admetos will not understand his loss of Alcestis until it's too late. So, the humble maid displays a far better understanding of the nature of mortality and its embitterment of life than the king, sheltered from suffering, has ever needed to. The maid also observes the strength of Alcestis's "destiny," which can't be resisted. She accepts the inevitability of her fate, in contrast to husband, whose stubbornness necessitated her death. Alcestis must wait until Herakles, whose life centers around fighting the seemingly undefeatable, comes to rescue her from Death and Hades. For now, her patient suffering displays the humility and acceptance in which Admetos is deficient; in that way, she is portrayed as the stronger of the two characters.

Lines 286-529 Quotes

ALCESTIS: Admetos, I am dying.
This is my last request of you, so listen well.
Of my own free will I gave my life
to let you live. I am dying for you, Admetos,
but I did not have to die.
I could have chosen otherwise.
As your widow
I might have married any man in Thessaly
and lived with him here and ruled this royal house.
But without you, with these children fatherless,
I could not live. I am young, Admetos,
but I have given you my youth—the good years,
the happy years. All the others failed you.

Related Characters: Alcestis (speaker), King Admetos

Related Themes:

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

In Alcestis's farewell speech, Euripides portrays Alcestis as a surprisingly self-aware, self-possessed character, even in the face of imminent death. Though she fears death and dreads leaving her children, Alcestis leverages this moment to make a final request of her husband—namely that he refrain from remarrying, since a stepmother would be unlikely to treat her children as they deserve. More significantly, Alcestis recognizes and names her own courageous choice to die, acknowledging that she did not have to do it. Far from being a passive, self-sacrificing stock figure, Alcestis willingly surrenders her life. She knows that she could have led a respectable life as Admetos's widow, even remaining queen of Thessaly. However, she knows she could not bear the grief of widowhood and her fatherless children. In this, she displays much greater wisdom than Admetos does; it's only after Alcestis dies that Admetos realizes how much her death costs him and that life loses its meaning for him without Alcestis present. Thus Alcestis, though she speaks relatively few words in the play overall, shows herself to be a markedly self-determining and powerful figure, in contrast to Admetos's selfish attempts to shirk death.

Lines 530-679 Quotes

CHORUS: O Death, in that dark tangle of your mind, if you have
eyes to see, look among the herded dead who go
with Charon in his long slow crossing over Acheron;
look and you will see, blazing in that crowd of ordinary
dead, the noblest life the sunlight ever shone upon!

You shine in memory. And mortal men, remembering
you, will praise your death: a song that does not die.
Each year, unaccompanied, your song shall rise,
a shining on the lips of men; or sometimes chanted
to the rude and simple lyre, at Sparta when the year
has come full circle, and the moon, a splendor, rides
the livelong night; or there in Athens' blazing noon.
Wherever there is light, wherever men remember love.
Death shall not eclipse the glory of your shining.

Related Characters: Chorus (speaker), Alcestis

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

After Alcestis dies, Admetos commands the chorus to sing in her honor. In doing so, they first appeal to Death himself, charging him to observe, amidst the pervasive darkness of Hades, the "blazing" presence of noble Alcestis as she is rowed over the river Acheron by the ferryman Charon. Then the chorus switches to addressing Alcestis directly. Associating Alcestis with the "light" of life, they describe how she will continue to shine in the memories and voices of the living. This will happen all over Greece, wherever lights shine. While the prediction that Death will not eclipse her shining is meant metaphorically, Euripides encloses a double meaning in this statement—in fact, Alcestis will not ultimately be "eclipsed" by death, but will be brought back from the darkness of death. Therefore, this quote can be read both as a funeral song grieving Alcestis's youthful demise, but also as a prophecy of her final prevailing over death.

HERAKLES: I have a labor to perform. Eurystheus is my master.
He commands, and I obey.

LEADER What is your mission? And where are you bound?

HERAKLES A long, hard journey.
My destination's Thrace. My orders are to capture
Diomedes' horses.

LEADER *Diomedes'* horses? It can't be done,
Herakles. Surely you've heard of Diomedes?
[...] Those horses are wild. They can't be broken.

HERAKLES Can't be broken?

LEADER Not without a fight, they can't.

HERAKLES Fighting's what I do.
My labors are my life. I can't refuse.

Related Characters: Chorus Leader, Herakles (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

Herakles, or Hercules, is one of the most famous heroic figures of Greek mythology. In the play, Herakles is on his way to complete one of the Twelve Labors he is compelled to perform for King Eurystheus, a trial set for him in consequence of having killed his wife and children at the goddess Hera's instigation. In this case, he must travel to Thrace to capture human flesh-eating horses which belong to Ares' son Diomedes. Herakles's matter-of-fact acceptance of the task is notable in this quote. Until the chorus leader informs him, he doesn't even know how deadly Diomedes's horses are, and he takes the information completely in stride. This complacent attitude is meant to contrast with that of Admetos, who resists the fearful destiny of death that has been set for him. Herakles is a partially divine figure and presumably better positioned to rebel against the constraints placed upon him, yet he accepts reality; By contrast, Admetos, a mortal man, tries to dodge reality—particularly the truth of human mortality. Herakles will not only rescue Alcestis from the consequences of Admetos's attitude but will help his friend toward a change of heart and outlook, as well.

Lines 680-914 Quotes

CHORUS: Hospitality is here.
What house could be more gracious or more generous
than this? Open-handed, always prodigal and free,
its master gives such lavish welcoming
that one might think his guests were gods.
Great gods have sheltered here.
Here Apollo, god of Delphi, condescending,
came, his high divinity constrained to serve
as shepherd for a year. And down these blessed hills,
to mating flocks the god of music sang the season's song…

Related Characters: Chorus (speaker), Apollo, Herakles, King Admetos

Related Themes:

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

After Admetos welcomes Herakles as a guest in the aftermath of Alcestis's death, the chorus leader marvels as his hospitality. In this quote, the chorus takes up the theme, singing in praise of Admetos's lavishness toward guests in general. The praise is genuine; the audience is meant to understand that Admetos is truly the most generous of hosts, yet the praise is double-edged as well. The chorus sings that "one might think his guests were gods." In fact, Admetos *has* hosted gods before, as Apollo's earlier departure proved. But the point of this statement is that Herakles isn't a god, and that Admetos isn't attentive to the fittingness of his behavior toward different kinds of guests. In its own way, this shortcoming is an example of Admetos's overall denial of human limitations, which is the play's primary criticism of him. Having Herakles as his guest will prove to be a turning-point, as Herakles realizes that Admetos misled him by failing to tell him of Alcestis's death. Herakles helps Admetos realize the importance of honoring guests by letting them participate not just in the joys of a household, but in the sorrows as well.

PHERES: I am not obliged to die for you as well.
Or do you think my father died for me?
There is no law, no precedent, in Greece
that children have a claim upon their fathers' lives.
A man is born to happiness, or otherwise.
He is born for himself.
Everything you had the right to get from me, you got.
I made you ruler of a rich and populous country.
And I intend to leave you all the vast domain my father left to me.
So how have I hurt you? What *more* do I owe you?
Life?
No. You live yours, and I'll live mine.
Do your own dying. I'll do mine.

Related Characters: Pheres (speaker), King Admetos

Related Themes:

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is situated in the midst of a showdown—an *agon*, in the terminology of ancient Greek tragedy—between Admetos and his father, Pheres. Pheres has come to offer funeral gifts in Alcestis's memory, only to be accused of neglect and cowardice by his son for refusing to die in his place. After hearing him out, Pheres chastises the "arrogant boy," arguing that it is Admetos who fundamentally misunderstands family obligations, not Pheres. Parents give life to their children and provide for them—in Admetos's case, this meant receiving an entire wealthy kingdom—but it is a selfish reversal of expectations to demand that parents

die for their offspring, too. Even more than this, Admetos fails to understand that people are responsible for their own happiness and must even "do their own dying." It's the height of hubris to shift that burden onto anyone else, whether his elderly father or his young wife. Although Admetos still dismisses his father in rage, this scene does represent a movement toward Admetos's ultimate repentance; he soon realizes that Pheres is right about human obligations, especially mortality.

Lines 915-1110 Quotes

HERAKLES: Lissen:
you hear that wine purling and gurgling in the cup?
Well, a swallow of this will do wonders, friend,
for whatever's ailing you.
I mean, we all gotta die. Right?
Well, that's why we all gotta think human thoughts,
and live while we can.
Eat, drink, and be merry.
Take it from me,
the way those gloomy, bellyachin' tragedians gripe,
life isn't life at all, it's just a goddam
funeral.

Related Characters: Herakles (speaker), King Admetos , Servant

Related Themes:

Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis

This quote takes place during Alcestis's funeral. Herakles, admitted as a guest in Admetos's palace, has been drunkenly storming around the house, ordering the servants around and generally making a nuisance of himself. Here, he makes a tipsy speech to a servant about the meaning of life—namely, that everyone is destined to die and must come to terms with that fact sooner or later. Only after accepting mortality can be person really enjoy life. Such humility is the essence of "[thinking] human thoughts," something that Admetos has not yet learned to do. So, although this speech is meant to make the audience laugh, it also gets to the heart of Euripides' argument in the play—that death is the central, inescapable fact of life. Finally, too, Herakles' closing jibe at "bellyachin' tragedians" is a knowing reference to writers like Euripides himself and the morbid tropes characteristic of their genre.

Lines 1111-1269 Quotes

CHORUS: —It had to be. We cannot choose our fates.
—A man can fight. But not with life,
not with death.
—Accept it like a man.
—Hard, hard, I know.
—Be brave, Admetos.
—Courage. Others too have lost their wives.
—Some soon, some late, every man is curbed
by suffering or fate.
—Now it is your turn.

[...]

LEADER: Your luck had been good, Admetos. High happiness and great wealth—both were yours. So when this sorrow struck so suddenly, it found you unprepared. Suffering was something you had never known.

Related Characters: Chorus Leader, Chorus (speaker), King Admetos

Related Themes:

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

After Alcestis's funeral, Admetos comes home in despair. Having lost his wife, he no longer sees anything worthwhile in his own life—the life his wife had ironically spared him by dying. In this quote, the members of the chorus fulfill their traditional dramatic role by offering moral exhortations to the protagonist, urging him to accept reality, be brave, and humble himself before the necessity of suffering. The chorus leader, in a few simple lines, sums up the chorus's point by telling Admetos that he has been sheltered from true suffering all his life. Now, by choosing to shift the burden of mortality onto his wife, he actually brings worse suffering on himself and must accept that. The chorus's and leader's words, then, offer a more sober echo of Herakles' drunken speech in an earlier scene. This suggests that Admetos is moving closer to accepting the inevitability of mortality and his complicity in his wife's death.

Lines 1270-1496 Quotes

ADMETOS: To all my subjects and fellow citizens,
I here and now proclaim a feast of thanks and praise
to celebrate the happiness of this great event.
Let the high altars blaze and smoke with sacrifice.
From this day forth we must remake our lives,
and make them better than they were before.

Happiness is mine, and now I know it.

Related Characters: King Admetos (speaker), Alcestis

Related Themes:

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, the conclusion of the play, parallels Admetos's earlier decree that his kingdom must observe a year's mourning, and that he must reject all future occasions for happiness in his own life. In this quote, Admetos turns mourning quite literally into rejoicing, and he reinstates the role of happiness in his own life. More than that, it's a *truer* happiness—one based in the reality of mortal human life's limits. Admetos now understands that he can only possess happiness when he willingly accepts the loss and pain that inevitably come with love—a wisdom that Alcestis already had and which her resurrected presence embodies. In keeping with the tone of renewal, Admetos also charges his subjects and the audience to "remake [their] lives" even better than before, armed with a realistic understanding of life and death. The tragic play thus ends on a note of celebration instead of the anguish that has pervaded it to this point. However, Alcestis's silent presence reminds the audience, too, that happiness must always be infused with the wisdom gained through suffering and loss.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

LINES 1-40

The play begins in Pherai, Thessaly, in the palace of Admetos, King of Thessaly. Apollo is just leaving Admetos's house and turns to say goodbye. He calls it a "dear house," even though he was compelled to "[eat] the bread of slavery" within its walls.

Thessaly was a small kingdom in northern Greece. Apollo is a Greek god of prophecy, healing, speech, and light who, in the traditional story adapted by Euripides, appeared anonymously at Admetos's home and asked to serve there as a slave—only later revealing himself as a god.

Apollo addresses the audience, explaining that his "slavery" was Zeus's fault, not Admetos's. Zeus killed Apollo's son, Asklepios, with "fatal lightning." Apollo retaliated by killing the Cyclopes who forged the lightning bolts. Therefore, Zeus "doomed" Apollo "to this duress, / constraining me to be the bond-slave / of a death-bound man."

Apollo's son Asklepios was known as a hero of medicine, killed by Zeus for his supposed hubris in restoring the sick to life. Asklepios's actions would be seen as threatening the gods' total power over mortality. So, Apollo's backstory not only accounts for his servitude in Admetos's house, it also introduces the theme of mortality that will figure prominently in the play.

Despite his "duress," Apollo considers Admetos his friend. In addition to guarding the palace, Apollo even saved Admetos by outwitting the Fates who'd doomed him to an early death. Nobody else "bound to him by ties of love" agreed to die in Admetos's place, not even his parents. Finally, his wife, Alcestis, agreed. She is dying right now. Apollo must leave the house so that death won't pollute his divinity. He sees Death, "punctual as always," approaching.

Admetos is introduced as a friendly and hospitable host. However, he also wishes to avoid death, even asking his loved ones to bear his doom in his place. Thus, his fear of mortality continues to be a prominent theme, and so does the significance of obligations—something to which Alcestis is more faithful, it's suggested, than Admetos or his parents.

LINES 41-115

Death, a winged, black-clad figure carrying a sword, is startled to see Apollo. The two face each other in a tense confrontation. Death asks Apollo if he's once again here "to violate the dues and honors / of the gods below," observing that, in saving Admetos, he's already cheated the Fates once. Now, it appears that, "unsatisfied and unappeased," he intends to save Alcestis, too.

In Greek mythology, death was personified in the ominous figure of Thanatos, who seldom appears in person, but does so here. The traditional story is that Apollo cheated the Fates—three sisters known as the Moirai—by getting them drunk. Death sees Apollo's action as an affront to the underworld gods, stealing from them what they're rightfully due.

Apollo explains that he hangs around Admetos's house because they are friends: "The troubles of those I love constrain me too." He begs Death to defer, letting Alcestis grow old—what difference could that make? Death refuses, citing "honor"—the younger his victim, the more humanity will fear and respect him.

Apollo speaks to the idea that love for others brings obligations. The idea that the sacrifice of young lives is more pleasing to the gods, winning them greater honor, is frequent in Euripides and in earlier Greek religion more broadly.

Apollo argues that if Alcestis dies old, her funeral will be rich. Death retorts that Apollo always sides with the rich, and that "the rich would buy immunity from dying." Furthermore, even Apollo "must learn a limit. You cannot have your way in everything you want."

Death's remark anticipates one that Admetos's father will make later—that people will, out of hubris, do whatever they can to dodge death. In contrast to this human attitude, even Apollo, a god, recognizes that he must observe limits and can't get everything he wants.

Apollo replies that Death's savagery won't be enough—a man is coming, "man enough / to break the wild stallions of Diomedes," who will fight and break Death by brute strength. Death will be forced to honor Apollo's "appeal against [his] wish." He reminds Death that "my hatred you shall have" and exits. Death mocks Apollo's "bluster" and tells the audience that Alcestis must die. He enters Admetos's palace, the doors closing slowly behind him. There is a long silence.

Apollo predicts the coming of Herakles, who will force Death to submit to his will. In other words, Death, too, will be forced to submit to obligation.

LINES 116-285

A chorus, a group of elderly citizens of Pherai, gather at the palace entrance. The chorus leader, noting the house's silence, wonders if Alcestis still lives. "If bravery and love deserve the **light**," he says, "no woman on this earth / […] ever less deserved to die!"

In ancient Greek tragedies, a chorus consisted of 12 to 15 singers, usually elderly men. The chorus served as a kind of mediator between audience and actors, represented traditional social mores, and/or exhorted the protagonist—a function that will appear later. Here, the chorus leader praises Alcestis, introducing the symbol of light for human life that serves as a contrast to Alcestis's inevitable fate of death.

The chorus searches in vain for the customary signs of death, knowing that Alcestis's death has been decreed. The leader observes that "When the good are hurt, those who love them suffer too. / We love, and love hurts." The chorus remarks that, had Asklepios, "Apollo's healing son," survived, he might have intervened: "he medicine to life and saved / death-tamed and -broken men." But Zeus killed Asklepios for this presumption, and now there is no hope.

Besides the conspicuous silence, the chorus is puzzled by the absence of traditional markers of a household death, like "the cleansing water / custom prescribes" at the door, or locks of hair hanging in the courtyard to honor the dead. The chorus leader observes that love necessarily brings suffering with it and that, with Asklepios dead, there is no obvious way to overcome death; there is a fixed chasm between the gods and human mortality.

The chorus leader sees that Alcestis's maid is coming out of the palace; she is weeping. He asks if Alcestis still lives. The maid replies that the queen is dying, and that Admetos "does not know the meaning of his loss. / He will not know, until it is too late." Furthermore, nothing can be done to save Alcestis because "Her destiny is too strong, / a force she cannot fight."

The maid's words are perceptive, even prophetic—Admetos won't understand what Alcestis's substitutionary death has cost him until it is too late. Meanwhile, Alcestis must bow to the inexorable fate that Admetos refused to face.

The chorus leader praises Alcestis as "incomparably a queen" with no earthly rival. The maid agrees, saying that Alcestis not only surpasses all women in the magnitude of her love, but also in "bravery and beauty in the face of death."

Alcestis is presented, through the eyes of her loyal servants and subjects, as the epitome of loyalty, love, and courage before death. They compare her to other women, but she seems to surpass Admetos in these ways as well.

The maid gives an account of Alcestis's preparations for death. That morning, Alcestis bathed in the river and dressed herself in her loveliest clothes. Then, she knelt before the hearth and prayed that the goddess would protect her children, giving her son a loving wife and her daughter a kind husband, and allowing both to live long lives. She then quietly prayed at each of the home altars. But in her room, she wept over her bed, remembering that here she "offered my maiden body and my love / to Admetos. Now I offer him my life." Then, her children and servants gathered around her as Alcestis bid each of them a fond and gracious goodbye.

Euripides presents Alcestis's character initially through others' eyes, building anticipation of her as a consummate queen and heroine. Alcestis's actions, such as her devotion to Hestia, the domestic goddess of the hearth, display her piety, and her tearful farewells make her loyalty in self-sacrifice even more affecting. She is, in short, an ideal wife, fulfilling her obligations at home and in the world.

The maid concludes, "What has [Admetos] gained but life? / If he had died, he would have lost Alcestis. / Now, as matters stand, he has lost her anyway." As a result, Admetos's life will taste of "bitterness that lasts."

The humble maid has a more realistic insight into Admetos's situation than he does, highlighting the king's hubris. She perceives that Admetos's life, preserved at such high cost, won't seem worth it to him before long.

The maid further reports that Admetos is weeping and imploring Alcestis not to leave him. Alcestis, rapidly fading, calls for a last view of the **light**. The maid excuses herself to announce the chorus leader's arrival, adding, "It isn't everyone who cares about this house / or is ready to share our sorrows with us. / But you have always been a good and loyal friend, / and, sir, you're welcome here." The maid exits.

The drama of Alcestis's death builds up before she even appears onstage. She longs to see the light of the sun for as long as possible before departing to the dark underworld. The chorus leader is characterized as a "good and loyal friend" because of his willingness to shoulder his friends' sorrows. This anticipates the arrival of Herakles later in the play, and the more ambiguous welcome he will receive from Admetos.

LINES 286-529

The chorus kneels to beseech the gods on Alcestis's behalf. They also wonder how Admetos can live without her, the leader adding: "Not for love, / but something more than love, Alcestis dies for you today." Then they notice Alcestis and Admetos emerging from the palace, accompanied by their children.

The chorus leader's remark suggests that Alcestis's death will have more far-reaching effects than a simple demonstration of a wife's affection for her husband.

Alcestis speaks longingly of the sun's **light** and the earth's shelter. She can see Charon crossing the lake in his boat, calling impatiently to her. She begins to feel the pressure of an unseen hand forcing her down. She then sees "black eyes glowing" and "black wings beating" and realizes it is Death frowning over her. As Death closes in, Alcestis clutches her children and bids them goodbye. Admetos begs her to fight and remain, telling her, "your dying is my death."

In Greek mythology, Charon is the ferryman who bears the dead across Acheron, a river in Hades. In contrast to Admetos's dodging of his fate, Alcestis feels fate palpably in the pressure of the invisible hand, and she sees Death vividly. Admetos begins to perceive the effects of his avoidance of death and the extreme grief that losing Alcestis will bring to his family.

Alcestis summons the strength to make her final request. She tells Admetos, "I did not have to die [for you]. I could have chosen otherwise." She points out that she could have "married any man in Thessaly" and ruled in Admetos's stead. However, everyone, even Admetos's elderly parents, refused to give up their lives for him. She concludes that "Some god has brought these things to pass. / Let it be." She asks Admetos not to remarry, since a second wife would reign jealously over her children, especially her daughter.

Though she is now inescapably in the grip of Fate, Alcestis also points out that she made an explicit choice to die for Admetos. She could still have enjoyed a decent life after Admetos's death. Instead, she chose to bear his own fate for him. She doesn't dwell in bitterness, though, attributing her position to the gods' will. However, she uses this moment to ask something of Admetos's own loyalty.

Admetos solemnly vows that "no other woman will ever live with me again." He further vows that he won't just mourn for the customary year, but for the rest of his life. Finally, "those whose cowardice has caused your death, […] will have my hatred, always," since, unlike Alcestis, they were not "loyal in love." From now on, "all festivity" is banned from his home. He won't even drink with friends or play his lute again. Admetos continues to grieve, wishing he had the song of Orpheus with which to "spell you back from death." He begs Alcestis to wait for him in the underworld.

Admetos not only vows what Alcestis has asked, but goes beyond her request with a number of excessive vows in the emotion of the moment—essentially promising never to enjoy happiness again. In a way, these rash vows highlight Admetos's resistance of boundaries; in submitting himself to one obligation—Alcestis's request that he never remarry—he entangles himself in other, self-imposed obligations that will prove troublesome later. He also wishes he could be like Orpheus, the mythical poet who rescued his wife, Eurydice, from Hades.

The chorus leader tells Admetos that he will "stand beside you now, as friends should stand / and we will mourn your wife together." Alcestis formally commits her children to Admetos's care, and, with a final goodbye, sinks onto a waiting litter and dies. As Admetos and the children crumple before her body in grief, the chorus leader tells the chorus and audience that the queen is dead. He tells Admetos, "All we can do with death / is bear it patiently."

With his loyalty amidst grief, the chorus leader is a conspicuous example of friendship. He also fulfills the traditional role of the Greek chorus figure by exhorting Admetos to bear up bravely in the face of death.

Admetos asks the chorus to support him by singing in honor of Alcestis: "cry defiance to this hard and bitter god / whom nothing will appease but death." He then proclaims to his subjects a year of public morning. The servants exit with Alcestis's body, followed by Admetos and the children.

Admetos's request for a song of "defiance" suggests that he is still chafing under the necessity of death, despite witnessing the loss of his wife.

LINES 530-679

The chorus sings in memory of Alcestis, whose life was "the noblest [...] the sunlight ever shone upon." Therefore, "wherever there is **light** [...] / Death shall not eclipse the glory of your shining." The chorus laments being too old to strive with Death and bring Alcestis back. They also charge Admetos's elderly parents with cowardice for refusing to die. Instead, Alcestis has died "in the fresh morning" of her life.

Alcestis is directly associated with light, the symbol of life; her "shining" is so bright that death can't quench it. The chorus's powerless age contrasts with Herakles's youthful strength, soon to appear. Admetos's parents' age likewise contrasts with Alcestis's youth, suggesting that Alcestis's premature death is unnatural.

Just then Herakles enters and greets the chorus. The chorus leader asks what business brings him to Thessaly. Herakles explains that he has a labor to perform for his master, Eurystheus, whose commands he obeys. He must journey to Thrace and capture Diomedes' horses. The chorus leader is aghast—those killer horses can't be broken without a fight. Herakles replies, "Fighting's what I do. / [...] I can't refuse."

The appearance of Herakles (Hercules), the greatest hero of ancient Greece, contrasts with the sorrowful helplessness just voiced by the chorus. Herakles is compelled to perform various labors and toils for Eurystheus, a king in Argos. Therefore, even this powerful figure is subject to obligations—something he accepts, and something Admetos, by contrast, has yet to fully accept in his own life. Diomedes was a son of the god Ares; he was the king of Thrace and commander of its "golden cavalry."

The chorus leader explains that Diomedes is Ares' fierce son, and Herakles says that this is just another example of "my labors and my life / [...] rough, uphill / all the way." But he's never "[flinched] from a fight," and he won't now.

Herakles didn't know the full story of Diomedes and his deadly horses, but it doesn't matter to him. As far as he's concerned, hardship and struggle are expected in life, and he doesn't back down from them—again contrasting with Admetos's "flinching" from the trial of death.

Admetos enters, dressed in mourning, and welcomes Herakles. When Herakles asks about his appearance, Admetos explains that there's a funeral today. When pressed, Admetos haltingly denies that anything has happened to Alcestis. Herakles knows about Alcestis's doom, so Admetos lets him believe that he's mourning her in advance: "those who are doomed are as good as dead." Then he claims that he is mourning the death of an orphaned woman who'd taken refuge in their house.

In contrast to the arrival of the chorus leader, who was welcomed by the maid as someone who's ready to support the household in mourning, Herakles is welcomed on a dishonest basis. He's kept in ignorance of household mourning, so he's not given the chance to join it. Admetos's desire to preserve the appearance of hospitality is creating an entanglement for the bonds of friendship.

At this, Herakles turns to leave, but Admetos takes his arm and forcibly detains him. Herakles resists, saying that one can't mourn and entertain friends at the same time. But Admetos prevails, insisting that Herakles be housed in the guest quarters and generously served.

Admetos's gesture of force and compulsion, seizing the reluctant Herakles's arm, will be repeated by Herakles later, at the climax of the play. This scene also illustrates the fact that Admetos is used to getting his own way.

After Herakles is escorted into the palace, the chorus leader asks if Admetos is crazy. Admetos says he can't turn away a friend. He has "pain enough," he says, "without the pain / of having my house called inhospitable and rude." But if Herakles is Admetos's friend, the leader replies, "then why conceal your sorrow?" Admetos says that his house has never been discourteous to guests and must not show "less than due regard / for those with claims upon my honor and my love."

The chorus leader, fulfilling his role of appealing to Admetos's conscience, perceptively asks why Admetos denies Herakles the chance to be a true friend. Admetos is genuinely hospitable and understands something of friendship's "claims" upon honor and love. However, these traits are still rather confused and undeveloped, stunted by Admetos's refusal to fully submit to fate.

LINES 680-914

The chorus sings that "hospitality is here," recalling the welcome and generosity shown to Apollo during his stay. Now, with his wife so recently dead, Admetos again welcomes a guest: "his courtesy and grace exceed all human scale." The chorus adds that "somehow I have faith, a growing hope / that for this noble, heaven-minded man, / all [...] may still be well."

The chorus's praise of Admetos's hospitality is genuine. At the same time, the remark that his generosity "[exceeds] all human scale" is another reference to the fact that Admetos isn't mindful of realistic limits. Herakles's arrival, meanwhile, injects the grieving chorus with hope.

Admetos enters, and Alcestis's body is borne from the palace, ready for the funeral. Then, Pheres enters, dressed in mourning and carrying funeral gifts. He and Admetos face one another on opposite sides of the bier.

The coming scene between Admetos and Pheres—with the two men facing each other across Alcestis's funeral bier—is known in Greek drama as an agon, *or confrontation. It parallels a similar* agon *between Apollo and Death earlier.*

Pheres praises Alcestis and offers his gifts, explaining that "We must honor her in death as she deserves; / she gave her life to let you keep the **light**." She also spared Pheres from being deprived of his son during his last years. But Admetos angrily steps forward and intercepts the gifts. He tells his father that he has come uninvited, and that his help would have been welcome when Admetos had to die, but Pheres was nowhere to be found: "and now you have the gall to come here with your mock / sorrow and your hypocrisy of love!"

Pheres demonstrates fatherly loyalty to his late daughter-in-law. But Admetos pointedly disrupts the display of loyalty, suggesting his insufficient grasp of such family bonds. He accuses Pheres of being the one who has fallen short in his obligations.

Admetos continues to belittle his father's cowardice, telling him "you let a woman / [...] do your duty for you." Pheres had nothing to lose, he claims, and yet he refused to repay Admetos's loyalty to him by dying. He swears he won't bury Pheres when he dies, and he formally disowns his parents.

There is a heavy irony in Admetos's comment, since, of course, he *"let a woman" fulfill his own duty. In the context of Greek culture, Admetos's rejection of the basic filial duty to bury his parents is shocking.*

Pheres demands to know who Admetos thinks he is. Pheres is a prince of Thessaly and refuses to be bullied by an "arrogant boy." He reminds his son that he raised him and gave him his house and kingdom; "I am not obliged to die for you as well." He tells Admetos that he owes him nothing more: "Do your own dying. I'll do mine." Admetos is the true coward, having essentially "murdered" Alcestis. Surely Admetos will do the same again, Pheres charges—he'll just "wheedle [his] latest wife" into dying for him the next time. Soon he leaves in anger, taking his rejected gifts.

Pheres calls out Admetos's hypocrisy. He points out that he has done all that is incumbent upon a father and more; Admetos grossly misunderstands familial obligations if he thinks that Pheres must also die for him. Each person must face death alone—a truth Admetos has refused to accept. Pheres accuses Admetos of an entitled attitude that won't learn, suggesting that he'll keep trying to outrun death's claim on him, no matter the cost to others.

LINES 915-1110

The servants carry Alcestis's bier to the funeral, and everyone exits. The stage is empty for awhile. Then a scowling old servant enters and addresses the audience. At the same time, Herakles can be heard singing a drinking song, off-key, in the background.

In this scene, the play takes a turn toward the tragicomic, also setting the stage for Herakles's heroism and the turning point of the play. Herakles's drunken revelry contrasts starkly with the sorrow and strife that's gone before.

The servant says that he's seen many strangers come to the house in his time, and they've all been shown hospitality. But the new guest "is the worst damned / guest this house and I have ever seen." Even though Admetos is obviously in mourning, "this dull clod" orders the servants around, drinks like a peasant, and sings bawdy songs. And the servants have been ordered not to tell Herakles about Alcestis's death, so they have to put up with the guest's rudeness.

This scene addresses the fact that there are multiple sides to hospitality; the guest also has obligations to the host. By drinking copiously and generally being disorderly, Herakles fails in his obligations as a guest, especially a guest in a house of mourning. But Herakles's failure traces back to Admetos's dishonesty—by concealing the truth of Alcestis's death, Admetos has robbed Herakles of the opportunity to be a good guest and a true friend.

Then Herakles enters, drunk, carrying wine and frequently hiccupping and belching as he speaks. He criticizes the servant for scowling just because "someone you barely knew dropped dead." He asks the servant if he really understands the human condition: "we all gotta die. / [...] That's fate. A mystery." So that's why we should enjoy ourselves while we can, "think human thoughts [...] / eat, drink, and be merry."

Herakles's comedic interlude nevertheless conveys some of the play's central truths. Even though he doesn't know that Alcestis has died, his generic comments about mortality point to those realities which Admetos has failed to grasp: death is inevitable and cannot be fully understood by mortal beings. This is part of the essence of being human—of "[thinking] human thoughts." Failing in this, people can't freely enjoy life.

The cranky servant agrees but points out that Herakles's behavior is out of place in a house of mourning. Suddenly Herakles sobers, realizing Admetos hasn't told him the whole truth. The servant finally tells him that Alcestis is dead, and Herakles is filled with remorse. He asks where the tomb is located, then summons his strength: "Come, o my tough spirit [...] / come and prove what man I am." When Death comes to Alcestis's grave, Herakles will ambush him and "crush him in my mortal grip" until he releases Alcestis. If Death doesn't show up, Herakles will pursue him in hell. It's all worth it to repay Admetos's friendship. He exits.

When told the truth, Herakles immediately transforms from a drunken partier to an undaunted hero, determined to reverse Admetos's loss out of loyalty to him. Herakles's strength is so formidable that even the powers of Hades will be forced to submit and surrender Alcestis back to life.

LINES 1111-1269

The chorus and Admetos re-enter. Admetos is in deep grief. He says that his home is no longer among the living; he wishes he were among the dead. He envies those who have never married, who live only for themselves and never know "how much [they] had to lose." The chorus replies that Admetos cannot fight with death; he must accept his loss, realizing that "some soon, some late, every man is curbed / by suffering or fate."

Admetos is coming to terms with the profundity of his loss. It turns out that the life for which he bargained so dearly is hardly worth living without Alcestis. He wishes he wasn't subject to the bonds of human relationship and the pain these bring. The chorus admonishes him, however, arguing that such bonds are part of life and cannot be enjoyed without simultaneously accepting loss and pain.

The chorus further points out that Admetos has always had good luck. He's never known suffering, so sorrow "found [him] unprepared." Admetos continues to despair; he has learned too late that his life isn't worth living. He has also lost his honor, as society will mock him as a coward for letting Alcestis die in his place.

The chorus drives the point home—Admetos has spent his life avoiding the human obligation to suffer. Bereavement, an ordinary human event, has disoriented him, robbing him of his sense of self and his place in society.

The chorus sings, "Necessity is stone / […] against her hard, relentless coming on, / all your craft and intellect are weak / […] Suffer and submit." Then the chorus addresses Admetos directly, exhorting him to bear his loss bravely, "for she was / brave. […] / Then will you be less brave?"

The chorus sings an instructive song about "Necessity"—in Greek, ananke*—which is a more impersonal force (hence "stone") than personified Fate. Necessity cannot be outmaneuvered; it demands submission. Alcestis understood this and acted accordingly. The chorus summons Admetos to a comparable bravery by coming to terms with death.*

LINES 1270-1496

Now Herakles enters, followed by a veiled girl. He tells Admetos that he had thought, as Admetos's friend, he had the right "to stand beside you in your hour of need / and prove my loyalty." But Admetos hid the truth from Herakles and misled him, while Herakles proceeded to revel drunkenly. This was wrong; but Herakles lets his friend's transgression go.

Herakles confronts Admetos about his breach of friendship. As a friend, he should have been permitted to grieve alongside Admetos. Actually, though, Herakles has *proven his loyalty in an unexpected way, which is soon to be unveiled.*

Herakles gestures to the girl. He asks Admetos to keep the girl, whom he won as a prize in an athletic contest, in his care until he returns from his errand in Thrace. If he doesn't return, then Admetos must keep her forever. Admetos begs Herakles to take the girl somewhere else. She only reminds Admetos of his loss; her presence would be too much to bear. Plus, there would be gossip that Admetos had betrayed his vow. He notices the girl's resemblance to Alcestis and weeps, feeling weak.

Herakles hasn't just come to admonish his friend; he has surpassed the ordinary obligations of loyalty (similar to what Alcestis has done) by solving Admetos's problem altogether. The "athletic contest" is of a different nature than Admetos supposes. For now, he can only grieve the veiled girl's likeness to Alcestis. Her very presence, veiled though it is, seems to deepen Admetos's grief by confronting him firsthand with his loss.

Herakles gently questions his friend, asking him what good it will do to refrain from marriage for the rest of his life. Admetos acknowledges that he will be judged as foolish, but that he owes Alcestis his honor. Herakles tells Admetos that he is "loyal in love." Then he brings the girl forward and orders his friend to "obey [...] / The courtesy you show this girl / may serve you in your time of need." He tells him he must take the girl into the palace, but Admetos refuses to touch her.

Here, Admetos has a chance to redeem himself, demonstrating his growth in loyalty. Whereas social expectations weighed on him earlier—such as when he refused to be thought inhospitable by rejecting Herakles's visit—now he cares only to preserve his loyalty to Alcestis. Herakles brings events full circle by appealing to Admetos's hospitable instinct, but now Admetos refuses to admit someone to his home on false pretenses, remembering his vow to Alcestis that no other woman will live there.

At this, Herakles seizes Admetos's arm and won't let go, though his friend protests that he's being forced against his will. Herakles gently joins Admetos's and Alcestis's hands and lifts the latter's veil. He tells Admetos to look at her. Admetos does, in disbelief.

Herakles's grip on Admetos parallels Admetos's earlier grasp of Herakles, refusing to let him leave. This time, it's Admetos who must submit to force. His doing so signifies his acceptance of the constraints of ordinary human life. In consequence, the newly humbled Admetos regains his wife, whose life he'd surrendered out of hubris.

Admetos doubts the miracle, thinking at first that Alcestis must be a ghost. Herakles retorts, "I am your friend, Admetos, / not some vulgar trafficker in sorcery and ghosts." At last Admetos believes and rejoices in his wife's return. Admetos nonchalantly describes his wrestling match with Death, explaining that Alcestis cannot speak for three days until death's stain has disappeared. He tells Admetos to "treat your guests and those you love / as they deserve" and then leaves, summoned to work that cannot wait.

Herakles, albeit humorously, reminds Admetos that he's a true friend, and that friendship is founded upon honesty. He encourages Admetos to treat his loved ones and guests justly from now on, now that he's learned to embrace the proper boundaries and limits of human life and hospitality. Ever committed to his own obligations, Herakles goes on to his next task.

As Herakles exits, Admetos turns to his subjects, proclaiming a thanksgiving feast: "From this day forth we must remake our lives, / and maker them better than they were before. / Happiness is mine, and now I know it." He and Alcestis exit into the palace. The chorus observes that the "god has found his way / for what no man expected" and exits as well.

With his closing proclamation, Admetos shows that he has embraced the moral of the play and will now "remake" his life accordingly, as should the audience. Now that he accepts mortality, he is capable of living happily for the first time. The chorus points out to the audience that the play's resolution has subverted expectations. Far from just being a self-sacrificing wife, Alcestis has overcome death, teaching her husband the ultimate life lesson as she does so. The tragedy has become comedy, with everything set right.

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