

# The Conflict of Obligations in Euripides' *Alcestis*

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ABOUT *ALCESTIS* A. M. Dale has remarked that "Perhaps no other play of Euripides except the *Bacchae* has provoked so much controversy among scholars in search of its 'real meaning'."<sup>1</sup> I hope to contribute to this controversy by an examination of the philosophical issues underlying the drama. A radical tension between the values of *philia* and *xenia* constitutes, as we shall see, a major issue within the play, with ramifications beyond the *Alcestis* and, in fact, beyond Greek tragedy in general: for this conflict between two seemingly autonomous value-systems conveys a stronger sense of life's limitations than its possibilities.

## I

The scene that provides perhaps the most critical test for an analysis of *Alcestis* is the concluding one, the 'happy ending'. One way of reading the play sees this resolution as ironic. According to Wesley Smith, for example, "The spectators at first are led to expect that the restoration of Alcestis is to depend on a show of virtue by Admetus. And by a fine stroke Euripides arranges that the restoration itself is the test. At the crucial moment Admetus fails the test."<sup>2</sup> On this interpretation

<sup>1</sup> *Euripides, Alcestis* (Oxford 1954: hereafter 'Dale') xviii. All citations are from this edition.

<sup>2</sup> W. D. Smith, "The Ironic Structure in *Alcestis*," *Phoenix* 14 (1960) 127-45 (=J. R. Wisdom, ed., *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Euripides' Alcestis: A Collection of Critical Essays* [Englewood Cliffs 1968]) 37-56 at 56. For other works that consider the ending 'ironic', see A. W. Verrall, *Euripides the Rationalist* (Cambridge 1895); K. von Fritz, "Euripides' *Alkestis* und ihre modernen Nachahmer und Kritiker," *AuA* 5 (1956) 27-69 (= *Antike und modern Tragödie: Neun Abhandlungen* [Berlin 1962] 256-321); C. R. Beye, "Alcestis and her Critics," *GRBS* 2 (1959) 111-27; and R. M. Nielsen, "Alcestis: A Paradox in Dying," *Ramus* 5 (1976) 92-102. More subtle ironic

Admetus does not deserve his good fortune: being unwarranted, the 'happy ending' must be ironic. More traditional views find in the conclusion a harmonious reconciliation. For T. B. L. Webster, "Within this essentially light-hearted play, the devotion of Alkestis and the self-discovery of Admetos are beautifully realized."<sup>3</sup> Philip Vellacott, on the other hand, sees the issue as one of social order and the rôle of women in Greek society:

This is a play about a good husband and an admirable marriage which, confronted with a crisis of Necessity, suddenly faces not merely the loss and sorrow which are the common human lot, but disgrace and guilt arising from the rare performance of what everyone recognizes as a wife's duty to her husband. The individual character of Alcestis is not important; she is there as the unique embodiment of an ideal of marriage based on the belief that a man's life is of more value than a woman's; and the play submits this ideal to critical and practical scrutiny.<sup>4</sup>

Here we have Euripides making, it seems, a feminist critique of Athenian society by illustrating the absurdity of the logical result of contemporary social values. But while Vellacott sees the 'ideal' represented at the beginning of the play in Alcestis' self-sacrifice, Anne Burnett locates achievement of the 'ideal' at the end, with Admetus' realization of loss:

[At the end of the play] Admetus and Alcestis are harboured now in a better life than any they had known before

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readings are given by W. Kullmann, "Zum Sinngehalt der euripideischen Alkestis," *AuA* 13 (1967) 127-49, and J. Gregory, "Euripides' *Alkestis*," *Hermes* 107 (1979) 259-70.

<sup>3</sup> *The Tragedies of Euripides* (London 1967) 52. Webster sees evidence for Admetus' transformation in his admission "now, too late, I understand" (940); for a somewhat different emphasis on Admetus' realization that life is not necessarily the ultimate good, see von Fritz (*supra* n.2).

<sup>4</sup> *Ironic Drama: A Study of Euripides' Method and Meaning* (Cambridge 1975) 105f. For an interpretation of the play as "a more realistic view ... of a wife's value to her husband," cf. G. Smith, "The *Alkestis* of Euripides: An Interpretation," *RivFil* 111 (1983) 129-45 at 144; for a reading of the play in terms of "male and female differences," cf. C. Segal, "Euripides' *Alkestis*: Female Death and Male Tears," *ClAnt* 11 (1992) 142-58 at 157.

(1157), and at last the ideal is become real.... The play has shown a pair of human beings faced with a number of choices. Each was able to discriminate between real and apparent qualities and each valued certain timeless things above the joy or pain of the moment. Both follow the path of virtue and it brings them grief and separation, but a god is interested in their case and he, by reversing nature, reunites the pair, restores their happiness, and gives their ideal transcendent reality.<sup>5</sup>

This array of contradictory readings seems to confirm Bernard Knox's description of the play as "most baffling."<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Burnett hints at this state of confusion when she continues: "This is not the sort of tale we have been taught to expect from Euripides, but he has told it."<sup>7</sup> Or has he?

Despite their differences, these traditional approaches share the assumption that Euripidean drama is best understood through the analysis of character. Such analysis forces the critic to accept the 'happy ending' as either ironical, in which case Admetus' failings are emphasized, or as sincere, with Admetus achieving a new self-awareness and thereby meriting the restoration of Alcestis. Yet in the case of Euripidean drama, as

<sup>5</sup> "The Virtues of Admetus," *CP* 60 (1965) 240-55 at 251f (=E. Segal, ed., *Greek Tragedy: Modern Essays in Criticism* [New York 1983] 254-71), elaborated in her *Catastrophe Survived: Euripides' Plays of Mixed Reversal* (Oxford 1971) 22-46.

<sup>6</sup> Knox limits himself to the plays discussed by Burnett (*supra* n.5) in his review of *Catastrophe Survived*, in "New Perspectives in Euripidean Criticism," *CP* 67 (1972) 270-79 (= *Word and Action: Essays on the Ancient Theater* [Baltimore 1979] 329-43 at 333).

<sup>7</sup> For other non-ironic readings, see: H. Ebeling, "The Admetus of Euripides Viewed in Relation to the Admetus of Tradition," *TAPA* 29 (1898) 65-85; J. L. Myres, "The Plot of the *Alcestis*," *JHS* 37 (1917) 195-218; D. M. Jones, "Euripides' *Alcestis*," *CR* 62 (1948) 50-55; L. Golden, "Euripides' *Alcestis*: Structure and Theme," *CJ* 66 (1970) 116-25; E. Bradley, "Admetus and the Triumph of Failure in Euripides' *Alcestis*," *Ramus* 9 (1980) 112-27; Smith (*supra* n.4); M. Lloyd, "Euripides' *Alcestis*," *G&R* n.s. 32 (1985) 119-31; R. S. Kilpatrick, "When a God Contrives': Γένοιτο μεντᾶν πᾶν θεοῦ τεχνομένον (*Ajax* 86): Divine Providence in *Alcestis* and *Ajax*," *Dionysius* 10 (1986) 3-20; R. G. A. Buxton, "Euripides' *Alkestis*: Five Aspects of an Interpretation," in *Papers given at a Colloquium on Greek Drama in honour of R. P. Winnington-Ingram* (London 1987) 17-31; M. Dyson, "Alcestis' Children and the Character of Admetus," *JHS* 108 (1988) 13-23; and C. A. E. Luschnig, "Interiors: Imaginary Spaces in *Alcestis* and *Medea*," *Mnemosyne* ser. 4 65 (1992) 19-44.

William Arrowsmith has pointed out, it is essential to recognize that

the emphasis will be upon ideas rather than character and that a thesis or problem will normally take precedence over development of character or heroism; that aesthetic or formal pleasure will be secondary to intellectual rigor and thought; and that the complexity of ideas presented may require severe formal dislocation or intricate blurrings of emotional modes and genres once kept artistically distinct.<sup>8</sup>

Those who disregard this approach, I suggest, miss much of the point of Euripides' plays. The characters in *Alcestis* are all subject to contradictory evaluations: Alcestis' melodramatic self-sacrifice,<sup>9</sup> Admetus' excessive bathos, the sophistry of Admetus' father Pheres, Heracles' buffoonery. If we limit interpretation to judging the various characters, chaos inevitably results because the original premise is itself radically absurd.<sup>10</sup> Euripides is doing much more here than simply showing how the ultimate 'wifely' sacrifice can have a cost higher than its value; by setting an extreme situation of this sort, he is in-

<sup>8</sup> "Euripides' Theater of Ideas," in E. Segal, ed., *Euripides: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs 1968) 13-33 at 13; cf. also Dale (xxiv) for similar sentiments. A. Rivier has attempted to provide guidelines for an interpretation that does not rest upon the subjectivity of the critic: see "En marge d'Alceste et de quelques interprétations récentes," *MusHelv* 29 (1972) 124-40 and 30 (1973) 130-43. C. M. J. Sicking also tries to avoid the pitfalls of psychologizing, but ultimately fails in the attempt: "Alceste: tragédie d'amour ou tragédie du devoir?" *Dioniso* 41 (1967) 155-74. *Contra*, T. Rosenmeyer, *The Masks of Tragedy* (Austin 1963) 199-248, who analyzes the play solely in terms of character. Cf. Beye (*supra* n.2: 113): "There seems to be no reason to believe that Euripides chose to dramatize the legend as a vehicle for an idea. Clearly enough none is apparent...." For the difficulty of basing interpretations of the tragedies on 'character', cf. C. Pelling, *Characterization and Individuality in Greek Literature* (Oxford 1990) esp. 83-99 (P. E. Easterling, "Constructing Character in Greek Tragedy"), 110-27 (S. Goldhill, "Character and Action, Representation and Reading: Greek Tragedy and its Critics"), 128-49 (J. Griffin, "Characterization in Euripides: *Hippolytus* and *Iphigeneia in Aulis*").

<sup>9</sup> Contrast the views of Beye (*supra* n.2), for whom Alcestis is short-sighted, selfish, and does not love her husband, with those of Dale (xxvi): "And of course she [Alcestis] loves Admetos—what else made her die for him?"

<sup>10</sup> Dale (xxii-xxix) emphasizes the "rhetoric of the situation." Cf. G. M. A. Grube, *The Drama of Euripides* (New York 1941) 129-46, who recognizes that "the story is difficult to accept" (129).

vestigating a conflict of values crucial to Greek culture and showing how this conflict can often be unresolvable. Thus what seems at first sight a merry and light-hearted melodrama turns out, on closer inquiry, to be a rather disconcerting statement about the human condition.

The figure central to this conflict of values is Admetus,<sup>11</sup> and it is appropriate to begin with an examination of his relationship with his wife. The term used most often in characterizing this relationship is *philia*.<sup>12</sup> When Apollo delivers the prologue, setting forth the situation, he explains that Admetus has "examined and gone through all his *philoï*" (915), including his father and mother, but "did not find one, except his wife, who was willing, dying in his place, no longer to look upon the light of day" (17f). When Alcestis is nearing death, Admetus declares that his living and dying depend on her, "for we cherish your *philia*" (279). Finally, at the conclusion of the scene, the Chorus prays that "such wedded *philia*" (472f) might be its own lot.

Within this scene, husband and wife are depicted as, or called, *philoï*. When the nurse describes Alcestis wasting away, she reports that Admetus "is willing, holding his *phile* spouse in his arms" (201). The road on which Alcestis is embarked is described by Admetus as "piteous for your *philoï*, and of those, especially for me and the children, for whom this grief is in common" (264f). And when Alcestis has died, Admetus pro-

<sup>11</sup> The case has been made that, according to the allocation of lines within the play, the protagonist is actually Admetus; cf. I. M. Linforth, "The Husband of Alcestis," *Queen's Quarterly* 53 (1946) 147-59.

<sup>12</sup> The importance of *philia* in *Alcestis* has been well established. R. Scodel first elaborated its importance in "Admetou logos and the *Alcestis*," *IJSCP* 83 (1979) 51-62; in her view, the conflict in the play arises from tensions within the notion of *philia*, with *xenia* incorporated under that broader heading. She therefore views the success of *xenoi* (Alcestis, Heracles) over natural *philoï* (Pheres) as a reflection of the conflicting aspects of *philia* per se. More recently, S. Schein, "Philia in Euripides' *Alcestis*," *Metis* 3 (1990) 179-206, has similarly dealt with conflicts within the notion of *philia*, positing three types: (1) *xenia*, (2) parental, and (3) marital. Both these analyses nevertheless fail to address the implications of the concluding scene, which, as I argue below, involves a confrontation, not a conflation, of the values of *philia* and *xenia*. For a study of the way in which *philia* was subjected to re-examination in other Greek tragedies, cf. D. Konstan, "Philia in Euripides' *Electra*," *Philologus* 129 (1985) 176-85; S. Goldhill's analysis of *Ajax* and *Antigone* in *Reading Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge 1986) 85-106; and S. Schein, "Philia in Euripides' *Medea*," in M. Griffith and D. J. Mastronarde, edd., *Cabinet of the Muses: Essays on Classical and Comparative Literature in Honor of Thomas G. Rosenmeyer* (Atlanta 1990) 57-73.

claims public mourning, explaining that "I will not bury any other corpse more *philos* than this one, nor better for me; she is worthy of my honor, for she alone died in my place" (432ff).<sup>13</sup>

From the Chorus Alcestis wins the title "most *phile*": "you will observe on this day a woman dying, not *phila* but *philtata*" (231ff), a superlative reinforced by the frequency with which she is described as the "best" wife (cf. *ariste* at 83f, 151f, 235f, 241f, 324, 442). Her excellence as a wife also strengthens her claim of being most *phile* to Admetus. Thus when Alcestis begs Admetus never to remarry and impose a stepmother upon their children (304–19), Admetus willingly agrees; overwhelmed by devotion he adds that he will remain in eternal mourning. This is the first of several new and significant obligations on the part of Admetus towards his wife.

The theme of *philia* manifests itself also in Admetus' other domestic relationships. This motif is extended from Admetus' *phile* wife (201; *philia* at 460, 599, 991, 993; cf. 876, 917) to their children, as we saw earlier when Admetus bewailed the effects of Alcestis' death (264f). When Alcestis demands from Admetus the oath that he will never remarry, she justifies this by adding, "for you have *philia* for these children no less than do I, at least if you are sound-minded" (302f). Admetus accepts this responsibility, saying, "I take [these children] as a *philon* gift from your *phile* hand" (376). In a variation on the traditional story, which has Death snatch the substitute victim on their

<sup>13</sup> For a study focusing on Admetus' view of death, see J. M. Bell, "Euripides' *Alkestis*: A Reading," *Emerita* 48 (1980) 43–75. R. Garner, "Death and Victory in Euripides' *Alkestis*," *ClAnt* 7 (1988) 58–71, develops the similarity between Alcestis and Patroclus, who also sacrifices himself out of *philia*; cf. *Pl. Symp.* 179b–180b. S. C. Humphreys makes the point that this play belongs "to a discourse on the relations between public and private life rather than to a discourse on relations between the sexes": *The Family, Women and Death* (London 1983) 58–78 at 72. Alcestis' self-sacrifice in behalf of Admetus needs to be seen in the context of the self-sacrifices of other women in the plays of Euripides, "sacrifices being made made for divine support before battles or equivalent critical moments.... These plays are pre-eminently 'social' and 'political'": J. Wilkins, "The State and the Individual: Euripides' Plays of Voluntary Self-Sacrifice," in A. Powell, ed., *Euripides, Women and Sexuality* (London 1990) 177–94. Further discussion in C. Segal, "Admetus' Divided House: Spatial Dichotomies and Gender Roles in Euripides' *Alkestis*," *Materiali e Discussioni* 28 (1992) 9–26.

wedding night,<sup>14</sup> Euripides places Alcestis' death years after the agreement between Apollo and Admetus. This change allows us to see Alcestis' excellence, her *philia*, with respect to her household and her children, as well as towards Admetus.<sup>15</sup> *Philia*, in this perspective, becomes associated with familial bonds.

This association also provides the context for the exchange between Admetus and his father.<sup>16</sup> Pheres' unwillingness to die does of course reflect Admetus' own reluctance. But it must do more than simply reveal an aspect of Admetus' character, for Admetus' relationship to Pheres differs in significant ways from that with Alcestis—in generation and sex, among others. It is evident that where we would expect familial ties to be strongest, between father and son,<sup>17</sup> we find them weakest. In his opening words to his father, Admetus declares “nor do I reckon your presence among *philoï*” (630). And if, Admetus later continues, he finds someone else to save him, he will consider himself to be that person's child and “old-age-supporting *philos*” (688).

<sup>14</sup> The traditional version has been closely studied by A. Lesky, *Alkestis: Der Mythos und das Drama* (Leipzig 1925), esp. 20–42. For a review of the way this work has set the terms of discussion for the play, cf. A. Michelini, *Euripides and the Tragic Tradition* (Madison 1987) 324–29 (“Appendix B: Albin Lesky and *Alkestis*”).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Dyson (*supra* n.7), who makes the point that the presence of children increases the weightiness of Alcestis' decision to die in behalf of Admetus and shows the intense grief of the entire family, while their absence from the conclusion reveals Admetus' devotion to Alcestis.

<sup>16</sup> Burnett (*supra* n.5) 40ff, has drawn attention to this scene's seemingly unnatural structure and arguments. She also observes that in the fairy-tale version, this character is not Admetus' father but merely someone who refused to sacrifice himself; Euripides' change, I suggest, as well as providing an occasion for one of Euripides' famous rhetorical displays, emphasizes the theme of *philia*, here contrasted with the actions of Alcestis. Furthermore, by importing Admetus' father rather than his mother, the issue of the survival of the *oikos* is suggested; cf. Luschign (*supra* n.7) and R. Seaford, “The Structural Problems of Marriage in Euripides,” in Powell (*supra* n.13) 151–76.

<sup>17</sup> For the view that an Athenian audience would have sympathized with Admetus rather than with Pheres, in terms of inheritance and legal standing, cf. E. M. Thury, “Euripides' *Alkestis* and the Athenian Generation Gap,” *Arethusa* 21 (1988) 197–214. Dale (xxv) recognized this point.

Pheres, sarcastically resorting to contractual language,<sup>18</sup> responds in kind (699–705):

Wisely have you found a way so as never to die, if always you persuade your current wife to die on your behalf; and then do you reproach your *philoï*, whoever are unwilling to do this, being yourself base? Be quiet; bear in mind that, if you have *philia* for your own soul, all men have this *philia*; so if of us you speak basely, hear many base things, and not falsehoods, about yourself.

Pheres later asserts that the sun, “this light of the god,” is *philos*, not his son Admetus; “this sphere,” he emphasizes by repetition, “is *philon*” (722). Admetus’ words to Alcestis summarize his own situation: “[My parents] were *philoï* in word, not in deed. But you, exchanging fortunes with me, preserved the most *philon* parts of my soul” (330–41). The strongest *philia*, it turns out, exists between Admetus and a woman whom he later describes as “foreign, *othneios*, but necessary for the house” (533).

The theme of foreignness first appears when, after Admetus’ final lament and the choral ode that follows, Heracles enters on his way to perform his eighth Labor, the capture of the man-eating mares of Diomedes. On arriving at Admetus’ house, Heracles had recognized the signs of mourning there, notably the shorn hair (512). Admetus, however, concealing Alcestis’ death, explains that she “both is and is no longer” (521) and denies that the woman who died was “a relative” (532). He then insists that Heracles stay with him, thereby fulfilling the Greek obligation of *xenia*.<sup>19</sup> And indeed, throughout the exchange between Heracles and Admetus, the notion of *xenia* is strongly emphasized, beginning with Heracles’ first word, “O *xenoi*, inhabitants of this land of Pherae, do I find Admetus at home?” (476f).

<sup>18</sup> For the importance of contractual and legalistic language in Pheres’ speeches, cf. Golden (*supra* n.7). The motif of profit-and-loss runs throughout the entire play; cf. D. J. Conacher, “Structural Aspects of Euripides’ *Alcestis*,” in D. Gerber, *Greek Poetry and Philosophy: Studies in Honour of Leonard Woodbury* (Atlanta 1984) 73–81.

<sup>19</sup> In insisting that Heracles stay with him, Admetus allows for the possibility of violating his earlier oath to Alcestis to forswear any sort of revelry. Heracles’ rowdiness simply fulfills the possibility raised here.



The theme of *xenia* looms larger when Admetus persuades Heracles to remain with him. Having recognized that Admetus is in mourning, though unaware that the dead woman is Alcestis, Heracles announces his plan to move "to the hearth of other *xenoi*" (538). For "a *xenos* is a disturbance to those in grief, if he comes" (546), and "it is shameful for *xenoi* to be entertained at the home of those who mourn" (542). Nonetheless, much to the chagrin of the chorus, Admetus orders a guest room to be prepared and care be taken not to impose the sounds of grief on their *xenos*. As he explains, in an extended passage (553–60),

If I drove away from my house and city the *xenos* coming to me, would you praise me more? Clearly not, for my misfortune would be in no way smaller, but I would be more lacking in *xenia*. And in addition to my other evils would be this evil, that my house is called hostile-to-*xenoi*. I myself find this man the best *xenos* whenever I go to the thirsty land of Argos.

Admetus concludes by asserting that "my quarters do not know how to drive away nor how to dishonor *xenoi*" (567f). It is therefore fitting that when the chorus begins their song immediately after this explanation, they first address the home of Admetus as *πολύξεινος καὶ ἐλεύθερος ἀνδρὸς ἀεὶ ποτ' οἴκος* (569).

The issue of *xenia* reappears when the servant complains of Heracles' behavior and finally reveals to him the true state of affairs. In a speech of twenty-five lines, the word *xenos* and its cognates occur six times. He begins "I know there have already come from a variety of lands to the house of Admetus many *xenoi*, before whom I have laid dinner; but never yet have I received at this hearth anyone worse than this *xenos*" (747–50). He proceeds to explain that Heracles did not accept his proper share of the gifts of a *xenos* (754) but instead became demanding and intemperate. Assigned to attend this *xenos* (766), and instructed not to show his grief to him (763), the servant asks "Do I hate this *xenos* justly, he who has come in the midst of evils?" (771f).

Sensing that he has been deceived and that it is actually Alcestis who has died, Heracles asks "Have I been treated terribly by my *xenoi*?" (816). And when the servant finally blurts out the truth, the death of Alcestis is directly juxtaposed

to the theme of hospitality: "The wife of Admetus has died, o *xenos*" (821). Thus from Heracles' first words to the final revelation of the truth, the relationship between Heracles and the house of Admetus has been repeatedly defined as one of *xenia*.

Ashamed of his behavior, Heracles resolves to rescue Alcestis from Death and to restore her to Admetus, the *xenos* who welcomed him into his house, though struck with weighty misfortune (854).<sup>20</sup> During Heracles' absence, Admetus and the chorus engage in an alternation of laments, a *kommos* in which the theme of *philia* emerges once again. The chorus sympathizes with the pain of never again looking upon the face of a *philia* bride (876f); Admetus recalls entering his house on his wedding day, holding the hand of his *philia* wife (917). He addresses the "great sorrows and griefs" of his *philo*i under the earth (895f), while the Chorus laments "your wife is dead, she has broken the bond of *philia*" (930). Finally, Admetus twice describes the Chorus as *philo*i (935, 960), and they in turn refer to Alcestis twice as *phila* (991f).

It is significant that when Heracles returns, his first words to Admetus deal with *philia*: "To a *philos*, Admetus, it is necessary to speak freely" (1008f). Heracles is trying, in effect, to mediate between *philia* and *xenia*. He continues: "I deemed it worthy, standing beside you in your misfortunes, to prove myself a *philos*" (1010f). Heracles aims at conflating two standards, his relationship with Admetus and Admetus' with Alcestis. Yet Admetus responds in terms of *xenia*, explaining that "pain would have been added to pain if Heracles had been driven to the house of some other *xenos*" (1039f). For, he continues, Heracles has many *xenoi* in Pherae (1044f). That Admetus responds to Heracles' profession of *philia* in terms of *xenia* shows the increasing tension between these two categories of relationship, whose relative demands, when juxtaposed in this way, reveal an unexpected tension.

<sup>20</sup> Burnett (*supra* n.5: 246) points out the artificial nature of using Heracles to defeat Death: Apollo could have done so, and Admetus even mentions the (im)possibility of retrieving Alcestis himself (357–62). It is precisely this device of introducing Heracles that enables Euripides to juxtapose the obligations of *philia* and *xenia*.

## II

What the Greeks meant by *philia* has been the subject of considerable discussion (*cf. supra* n.12). Although by the time of Aristotle, *philia* had become an essential element in "the good life,"<sup>21</sup> it has been shown that "the effects of Homeric usage persist to a considerable degree in the moral philosophy of Aristotle."<sup>22</sup> The tension within the Homeric usage of *philos* foreshadows the very conflict that Euripides is exploring in the *Alcestis*.

The traditional interpretation of *philos* has included an affective component, the sense of 'dear'. It seems, however, that *philos*, the adjectival form of *philia*, originally entailed an ambiguity: "in Homer *philos* has two meanings: besides that of 'friend' *philos* has a *possessive* sense.... It is a mark of possession that does not imply any friendly relation."<sup>23</sup> According to this view, being *philos* marks, fundamentally, a social bond, as Benveniste explains (273):

The social meaning [of *philos*] is prior and connected in particular with hospitality—the guest is *philos* and benefits from the specific treatment designated by *philein* 'to be hospitable'—but also with other forms of attachment and of mutual gratitude: *philein*, *philotes* may imply the exchange of oaths and *philema* denotes the 'kiss', the regular form of greeting or welcome among *philoï*. Emotional values appear when the term is used with reference to relations within a family group: *philos* 'dear', *philotes* 'love'.

The social basis of *philia*, then, connects it to hospitality.

Traditionally, however, the notion of hospitality was expressed by *xenia*. In Finley's view, "[Guest-friend] is the

<sup>21</sup> *Cf.* M. C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge 1986) 343–72.

<sup>22</sup> A. W. H. Adkins, "'Friendship' and 'Self-Sufficiency' in Homer and Aristotle," *CQ* NS. 13 (1963) 30–45 at 30.

<sup>23</sup> É. BENVENISTE, *Indo-European Language and Society*, tr. E. Palmer (Coral Gables 1973: hereafter 'Benveniste') 273–88 at 275. Benveniste claims that neither sense of *philos* is derivable from the other. For the view that the possessive reflexive sense is the original, and 'friend' derivative, *cf.* E. P. Hamp, "Philos," *BullSocLing* 77 (1982) 251–62. For a derivation of *philos* that relates it to trust, *cf.* J. Taillardat, "*Philotes, Pistis et Foedus*," *REG* 95 (1982) 1–14.

conventional, admittedly clumsy, English rendition of the Greek *xenos* in one of its senses. The same Greek word also meant 'stranger', 'foreigner', and sometimes 'host', a semantic range symbolic of the ambivalence which characterized all dealing with the stranger in that archaic world."<sup>24</sup> "Guest friend and guest-friendship," he points out, "were far more than sentimental terms of human affection. In the world of Odysseus they were technical names for very concrete relationships, as formal and as evocative of rights and duties as marriage." *Xenia*, like *philia*, goes beyond emotional relations.

The distinction, then, between *philia*, on the one hand, and *xenia*, on the other, is that the first exists between members of the same social unit, whereas the second establishes relations between social units.<sup>25</sup>

At home, one is *philos*, a member entirely apart from one's group. That which is one's own (*philos*) is valued and in a safe place. Away from home, one can, in the capacity of a *xe(i)nos*, be received by an *agathos* and receive 'protection' ... that is to say, that to which relatives have a right. In other words, the *agathos* and the *xe(i)nos* become *philoï*, relatives by contract; the *xe(i)nos* is, for all intents and purposes, adopted (appointed *philos*) for the duration of his sojourn.<sup>26</sup>

There is a complementary relationship between *philia* and *xenia* in obligations, respectively, within one's home and outside one's home and city.

*Philia* and *xenia* thus constitute different aspects of the same relationship. According to Finley (102),

<sup>24</sup> *The World of Odysseus*<sup>2</sup> (New York 1978) 99–103.

<sup>25</sup> This point is made especially clear by G. Herman, *Ritualized Friendship and the Greek City* (Cambridge 1987), esp. 10–31. As Herman observes, with the rise of the *polis* the obligations of *xenia* diminished in forcefulness.

<sup>26</sup> Hamp (*supra* n.23) 259 (my translation). Cf. the remarks of Adkins (*supra* n.22: 36) that "a *philon* object" is something "on whose help one can rely when one needs it, perhaps at some distant future time if he is a *philos* from some distance, almost at once if he is a member of the same *oikos*. *Philein* is an act which creates or maintains a co-operative relationship; and *it need not be accompanied by any friendly feeling at all*: it is the action which is all-important." On this scale, *xenia*—the tie to "a *philos* from some distance"—does not conflict with *philia* but is a form of it. This relationship, I suggest, is precisely what the *Alcestis* is calling into question.

The stranger who had a *xenos* in a foreign land—and every other community was foreign soil—had an effective substitute for kinsmen, a protector, representative and ally. He had a refuge if he were forced to flee his home, a storehouse on which to draw when compelled to travel, and a source of men and arms if drawn into battle. These were all personal relations, but with the powerful lords the personal merged into the political, and then guest-friendship was the Homeric version, or forerunner, of political and military alliances.

A *philos* supplies one's needs when one is at home, the *xenos* does so when one goes abroad. In the tension between *xenia* and *philia*, then, we see mirrored the tension between the public and the private, contracts and kinship, the political and the personal, our social nature and our individuality.

The institutions of *xenia* and of marriage provided the means for incorporating the foreigner into one's household: "guest-friendship was ... the alternative to marriage in forging bonds between rulers."<sup>27</sup> Yet the institution of marriage also provided a mediation between *xenia* and *philia*. For "the name of *philos* is extended to relations living in the same house as the master of the house, especially to her whom he has introduced as his wife" (Benveniste 282). A wife from outside the city, a *xe(i)ne*, becomes *phile* upon entering her husband's home. By describing the dead member of his household as *othneios* (523–33; cf. 810), Admetus avoids describing her in terms of either pole, *xenia* or *philia*.

The obligations of *philia* and *xenia* become embodied, for Admetus, in the characters of Alcestis and Heracles. Thus far in our analysis, there has been no explicit conflict between the two: first we saw Admetus in his interactions with his wife, an acquired *philos*; then he undertook his obligation of *xenia* towards Heracles; there ensued the scene with his father Pheres, where the bonds with his natural *philos* were severed; finally, after Alcestis' death, we saw him interacting with his guest-friend again. Everything, and everyone, has been presented in the play with reference to Admetus.<sup>28</sup> Yet when

<sup>27</sup> Finley (*supra* n.25) 99; cf. 126–29 for his discussion of *philia*.

<sup>28</sup> This focus accounts for the lack of any expression of sentiment towards Admetus on the part of Alcestis: her requests highlight Admetus' obligations towards her, her claims of *philia*.

Heracles returns, he brings with him a veiled woman whom he insists on leaving in the care of Admetus.<sup>29</sup> This places Admetus in the dilemma of whether to remain true to his promise to his most *phile* wife (never to accept another in her stead), or to be the good *xenos*, caring for and protecting the prize of his friend. Admetus is suddenly subjected to a conflict of obligations.<sup>30</sup>

That we are intended to see this problem as crucial to the drama is suggested, I believe, by the device of keeping Alcestis' identity hidden. Admetus observes: "You, woman, whoever you are, you have the same measures of form as Alcestis" (1061ff), and "I seem, looking on her, to see my wife" (1066f). When Heracles laments to Admetus, "If only I had such power so as to carry your wife from the infernal house towards the light, and to present this kindness to you" (1072ff), he implies his inability to perform this deed; but this is precisely what he is doing. As he will later explain, he has fought with Death and won; he has rescued Alcestis.<sup>31</sup> Yet he refuses to make this accomplishment clear to Admetus. Heracles is, in fact, guilty of the same offense for which he had previously reproached Admetus—that is, a failure of honesty with his friend (1008–11; cf. 539–59, 1042–91). The contrivance of silence, I suggest, is needed to place Admetus in this predicament.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> For this tripartite division of the *philia-xenia* conflict, cf. Conacher (*supra* n.18); J. R. Wilson, "Introduction," in Wilson, ed., *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Euripides' Alcestis* (Englewood Cliffs 1968) esp. 3f. V. Castellani, "Notes on the Structure of Euripides' *Alcestis*," *AJP* 100 (1979) 487–96, gives an acute analysis of a two-part structure of the play, not quite corresponding to the division presented here.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. the view of Z. Ritoók, "Euripides: *Alcestis*: A Comedy or a Tragedy?" *ActaLittHung* 19 (1977) 168–78 at 174, that this play presents a situation "when values, considered to be firm before, become questionable in the mind of a society or, at least, of a large part of it." He claims, however, that this reconsideration is only implicit in the text, because "the author does not give a firm and definite scale of values" (173); I suggest that the aim of Euripides, on the contrary, is to present this issue explicitly.

<sup>31</sup> For the importance of the description of this contest, cf. M. Poliakoff, "Euripides, *Alcestis* 1029–1032," *Mnemosyne* SER. 4 35 (1982) 141ff.

<sup>32</sup> For the ritual aspect of this silence see D. J. Conacher, *Euripides: Alcestis* (Wiltshire 1988) ad 1144ff, with reference to W. Burkert, *Greek Religion*, tr. J. Raffan (Cambridge [Mass.] 1985) 194 with n.38; cf. also G. G. Betts, "The Silence of Alcestis," *Mnemosyne* SER. 4 18 (1965) 181f. For the intriguing and ingenious suggestion that Alcestis is silent at the conclusion because Heracles is actually returning her corpse, the "statue" that Admetus had vowed to take to bed (348–54), cf. D. L. Drew, "Euripides' *Alcestis*," *AJP* 52 (1931) 295–319.

If he accepts this 'prize', Admetus violates his pledge to his wife Alcestis, his *phile*;<sup>33</sup> if he rejects it, he disparages the importance of hospitality, his obligation to *xenia*. Admetus is caught between competing and mutually exclusive alternatives, as he is aware. When he asserts that some *eros* (1080) drives him to mourn forever, Heracles observes that "to have *philia* for the dead brings tears" (1081). But although Heracles later claims "I praise you for being a faithful *philos* to your wife" (1095), he nonetheless induces Admetus to take the woman. Admetus protests, "May I die if I betray this woman [my wife], even if she is no longer alive" (1096). Yet this is precisely what Heracles has in mind when he says "A wife will stop your misfortune, and the desires [*pothoi*] of a new marriage" (1087). Heracles is here exhorting Admetus to remarry, even if this means rejecting his previous oath. Bradley (*supra* n.7: 125) has gone so far as to claim that "Betrayal of his vow, as Admetus states, would mean death for him (1090), but death only to his former, inconsequential self, in favor of the life-renewing *eros* which he fights to control in the presence of the veiled woman." Heracles' insistence finally prevails, and Admetus accepts the woman: "Have your way, then; but you are doing things not pleasing to me" (1108). Heracles, however, insists on more: Admetus must receive her personally. Again Admetus resists: "Sir, you force me to do these things against my will" (1116). Heracles repeats his demands: "Dare to extend your hand and touch this *xene* woman" (1117). Yet this woman is Alcestis, whom Admetus will shortly recognize, calling her his "most *phile* wife" (1133). In yielding to Heracles, Admetus appears to reconcile *philia* and *xenia*, to the extent that Alcestis now embodies both.<sup>34</sup>

But in heeding the injunctions of Heracles—who again describes himself Admetus' *xenos* (1128)—Admetus has disregarded his pledge to Alcestis; he has given priority to *xenia* over *philia*. This choice on Admetus' part is consistent with his

<sup>33</sup> Cf. 1087–96, where, as Conacher points out (*supra* n.33), "The implication now becomes fairly obvious ... that Heracles really intends the veiled woman for Admetus' bed."

<sup>34</sup> Alcestis' mediation between *philia* and *xenia* parallels Heracles' action, based on his claim as Admetus' *philos* (1008–11). Moreover, both Alcestis and Heracles, in returning from the Underworld, mediate between life and death, the poles established at the beginning of the play in the exchange between Apollo and Thanatos.

previous actions. *Xenia* has been Admetus' prime virtue, his *arete*, all along.<sup>35</sup> We learned from Apollo's prologue that, after Zeus had struck Apollo's son Asclepius with the lightning bolt, Apollo slew the Cyclopes and in penance was forced to serve a mortal. So, Apollo continues, "coming to this land, I tended the cattle for this *xenos*" (8). It was because of Admetus' kindness as *xenos* that Apollo granted him the boon of finding someone to die in this place. Further, he announces to Death the advent of someone—that is, Heracles—"who, being treated as a *xenos* in the house of Admetus, will forcefully deprive you of this woman" (68f). There has been no suspense about the outcome; the most compelling issue has been the balancing of obligations. Twice Heracles remarks on Admetus' excellence, first when regretting his unseemly behavior "in the house of this man with *philia*-for-his-*xenoi*" (830), and later when he asks "Who of the Thessalians has more *philia*-for-his-*xenoi* than does this man?" (858). Although the servant may believe Admetus has "too much *philia*-for-his-*xenoi*" (809), Admetus' virtue (or *arete*) of *xenia* was the source of his predicament and will ultimately resolve it. Such an interpretation might seem to find harmony in the outcome, seeing the reunion of Admetus and Alcestis as a 'happy ending'.<sup>36</sup>

But Admetus' betrayal of his pledge to Alcestis renders this reading problematic.<sup>37</sup> His vow to remain in mourning, not simply for a year but for eternity, banishing revelry and music from his house, has been rejected with the entry of Heracles; the oath not to take another woman to his bed is broken when he accepts the woman from Heracles' hand. These actions cannot be glossed over and, combined with Heracles' impossible achievement of rescuing Alcestis from the dead, lead to more pessimistic conclusions. Two points make such a view unavoidable. First, in renegeing on his vow, Admetus is, it

<sup>35</sup> As Dale (xxvi) observes, Admetus is characterized by his "regal hospitality" with little attention paid to "the sort of person Admetus was."

<sup>36</sup> Cf. the conclusion of Smith (*supra* n.4: 145) that "All in all, Euripides' *Alcestis* is a fifth-century version of an old tale with its values realistically transformed in solid affirmation of the indispensability of *oikos*, *philia*, and *xenia* for the good life."

<sup>37</sup> Cf. the observation of Wilson (*supra* 30: 11): "The interweaving of plot and counterplot now finds a happily unreal solution which is only bitter when measured against the moral reality which nearly everyone conspires to forget." So too Conacher (*supra* n.33) 42f.



seems, denying the importance of *philia*. In the conflict of obligations, Admetus makes a choice of *xenia* over *philia*. Yet—and this is the second point—for this choice to result in a ‘happy ending’ requires that the *xenos* be Heracles, a figure who can wrestle with Death and win.<sup>38</sup> In order for obedience to the demands of *xenia* to restore the vows of *philia*, a feat is required that only Heracles can accomplish. To make this point, Euripides has varied the traditional tale, in which the bridegroom himself fights with Death, and assigned this task to Heracles instead (cf. Lesky [ *supra* n.14]). Further, Heracles performs the very action of reviving the dead for which Asclepius, the son of Apollo, had been blasted by Zeus’ thunderbolt, thereby beginning this entire sequence of events. Heracles, in effect, stands apart even from the other sons of gods, for his power, in this version, proves unique.

Heracles’ divine intervention at the end also introduces a contrived balance to the divine action at the beginning, in Apollo’s grant to Admetus to find someone to die for him. Just as Apollo’s boon does not solve the problem of (Admetus’) mortality, as Admetus comes to realize when he finds his life without Alcestis worse than death, so Heracles’ action fails to resolve the issues of the play, for this ‘resolution’ calls itself into question. Apollo’s gift was shown to be no gift, but rather an event precipitating a crisis: who will die? at what cost? what is the value of life? Likewise, the ‘happy ending’ is shown to be not ‘happy’, but rather an enigmatic development that creates yet further questions. Indeed, the actions of Apollo and Heracles serve less to resolve matters than to bring into relief the confrontation between *philia* and *xenia*. The question whether Admetus deserves his good fortune is secondary to

<sup>38</sup> For the importance of the death motif and its ambiguous, indeed corrupting, implications, cf. Rosenmeyer (*supra* n.8); Nielsen (*supra* n.2); S. E. Sully, “Some Issues in the Second Episode of Euripides’ *Alcestis*,” in M. Cropp, E. Fantham, and S. E. Scully, edd., *Greek Tragedy and its Legacy: Essays Presented to D. J. Conacher* (Calgary 1986) 135–48; Garner (*supra* n.13); Bradley (*supra* n.7)—each with different perspectives on this issue. Humphreys (*supra* 13: 144–64) places the process of dying in its cultural context, pointing out that the “conception of a critical moment which marks the transition between a period of ‘dying’ and the subsequent stage in which the dead person is ‘laid out’ for final rites before being removed from the social context of the living does not necessarily exist in all cultures” (148). Admetus’ equivocation that Alcestis “both is and no longer is” (521) raises this possibility.

the question of the conflict of obligations, a conflict that the rôle of Heracles is created to provoke.

About the Euripidean theater of ideas, Arrowsmith has observed (*supra* n.8: 30) that

Typically it likes to conceal the truth beneath strata of irony because this is the look of truth: layered and elusive. For the same reason it presents its typical actions as problems and thereby involves the audience in a new relation, not as worshipers but as jurors who must resolve the problem by decision. But because the problem is usually incapable of outright resolution, is in fact tragic, the audience is compelled to forfeit the only luxury of making a decision—the luxury of *knowing* that one has decided wisely. Something—innocence, comfort, complacency—is always forfeited, or meant to be forfeited, by the audience of jurors.

The conflict between *philia* and *xenia* entails such a loss. We, like Euripides, like the Greeks, are caught in the web of competing duties, and this tragic dilemma, it seems, is what Euripides is examining: in a world of conflicting values, how can we deal with the competing obligations that arise from our many human connections? Recognizing, appreciating, and grappling with this problem is, I suggest, an integral element of the *Alcestis*, as it is an integral element of being human.<sup>39</sup>

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