THE PROMINENCE OF WOMEN IN TRAGEDY. *ALCESTIS* AND THE *OIKOS*

Most classicists are aware of the following paradox: Despite their low public profile, women figure prominently on the theatrical stage. Or so we are used to believe. I intend to question this idea of «prominence» with reference to Euripides' *Alcestis*.

During the examination of *Alcestis*, we should concentrate our attention on three special topics: (a) the character of Admetus as counterpart to his wife, (b) the sacrifice of Alcestis and its impact within and outside the stage action, and (c) the concept of the *oikos* and its employment in this play. As will become obvious, these topics are all interwoven with each other and constitute a tripartite whole which will often leave us unable to examine one without referring to the others. The moral evaluation of Alcestis and Admetus in relation to each other will help us define the tragic meaning of the play and, subsequently, the play's function within the the framework of Athenian theatre and society.

In Admetus' case, attention is focused in the ways that his behaviour seems «un-manly», inappropriate to a man and a ruler of the land[1]. In the study of his character we can trace three basic flaws: his initial assent to Apollo's offer, his behaviour towards Pheres, and his role in the *xenia* of Heracles with the implications to his duty towards the dead queen. These instances demand our attention, because it is here that Admetus' personality is outlined.

Perhaps the biggest problem regarding Admetus' ἀνδρεία is his acceptance of Apollo's favour, in the first place. This is, however, a point that is promptly explained in the course of the play's events. In line 1071 it is stated

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1. For Admetus' un-masculine behaviour see C. Segal, *Euripides and the Poetics of Sorrow*, London 1993, pp. 51-72.

clearly that «one must accept the gift offered by a god» even if one must καρτερεῖν, endure it. As Burnett (1983, p. 256) implies, it is most probable that Admetus had no choice at the time[2]. He simply had to accept the *charis*. Alcestis was the one «willing to allow her husband Admetus to accept the god's gift of a postponement of death, by herself dying in his place»[3]. Irrespective of Alcestis' logic and motives, what is at stake here is Admetus' valor or, whether he can be labeled a coward for allowing his wife to die in his stead.

One thing that is not clear in the play is whether Alcestis was asked by Admetus to die in his place. There is evidence that after Admetus received the god's gift, he asked a number of people – including his parents – if they would be willing to die instead of him (15-18). As we read the text, it is left open whether Admetus has actually approached Alcestis with his outrageous request. Beye finds it obvious in lines 935-961, that Alcestis offers to die at her husband's request[4].

I can see no clear allusion in these lines. Perhaps Beye interpreted as conclusive the sorrow of the husband and the understandable sense of grief that he expresses. Nevertheless, since Admetus does not say that he asked Alcestis to die in his place, we should only read in his guilt the natural reaction of a husband whose wife died when she could be alive, while he lives when he should be dead.

Whether Admetus asked Alcestis to die for him, is a point that remains obscure throughout the play. It is possible that Euripides relies on the audience's mythological literacy, here, to fill in this part of the story. However, I believe that by maintaining this ambiguity in the plot, Euripides draws the audience's attention to the action that follows the *charis* of the god, rather than the details concerning this *charis*. Lingering on these details could prove distracting: a modern spectator would definitely have questioned the easiness and eagerness with which Admetus accepts such a *charis* and the almost naive approach to his friends and family. Would an ancient audience react in the same way? Would they wonder «how dares he accept such a favour»? The chorus' answer in 1071 could be either an echo of an actual popular religious belief or an attempt to justify – if possible – Admetus' decision. In lines 703-705 Pheres says to his son:

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2. A. P. Burnett, «The Virtues of Admetus», *Classical Philology* 60 (1965) 240-255. Reprinted in E. Segal, *Oxford Readings in Greek Tragedy*, Oxford 1983, pp. 254-271.

3. R. Buxton, *Imaginary Greece*, Cambridge 1994, p. 120. Cf. C. Segal, «Admetus' Divided House: Spatial Dichotomies and Gender Roles in Euripides' *Alcestis*», *M.d.* 28 (1992) 22.

4. C. R. Beye, «Alcestis and her Critics», *Greek Roman and Byzantine Studies* 2 (1959) 111-127.

σίγα· νόμιζε δ' εἰ σὺ τὴν σαὐτοῦ φιλεῖς
ψυχήν, φιλεῖν ἅπαντας· εἰ δ' ἡμᾶς κακῶς
ἐρεῖς, ἀκούσῃ πολλὰ κοὐ ψευδῆ κακά.

Does Pheres imply that the rest of the people whom Admetus had approached share his – bad – opinion of his son, as is read in lines 695-702 (where he accuses Admetus of cowardice), and 730-733 (where he accuses him of responsibility of Alcestis' death)? If this is the case, then it strengthens the point that Admetus' piety in accepting Apollo's gift was not clear to all. However, during the stichomythia in lines 706-740 Pheres speaks for himself. Thus it would not be right to consider lines 703-705 as an indication of the playwright's intention to cast a shadow on Admetus. This does not mean we should ignore what Pheres says because Pheres is unlikable[5]. Michelini also refers to the «basic given of dramatic performance, namely the cogency and power of whatever is presented through mimesis. Unpleasant truths are usually spoken by unpleasant people, and Phere's nasty characteristics make him more rather than less likely to stick in the argument»[6]. This sounds plausible, but we still should not read too much into Pheres' words. These lines are uttered by an outraged Pheres and illuminate only the state of mind that he – and only he – was in, at that particular moment. It is true that Admetus does not refute Pheres' prophecies in 730-731, namely that Alcestis' kinsmen will make him pay the penalty for her death, since he «murdered» her. The only answer from Admetus is: «At least you will die dishonoured when at last you die» (725). Conacher (p. 79) wonders whether Admetus realizes that this could also be *his* fate[7]. Perhaps the audience, too, thought of the same thing; but the plot resolves such vague threats: Alcestis is brought back to life and no kin of hers has to avenge her death. Dyson (1988, p. 13) suggested that there is no implication of cowardice here, since the poet is obviously «concerned with how Admetus suffers and not with his state of mind when his wife promised to die for him»[8]. Whether Admetus remains δυσκλεής must be deducted from the rest of the action.

We cannot conclude whether Admetus would have been more heroic or more pious if he had rejected Apollo's offer. We have no other case in

5. See A. Lesky, «Alkestis, der Mythus und das Drama», *S.B. Wien. Phil.-Hist. Klasse* 203, Heft 2 (1925) 82; A. M. Dale, *Euripides' Alcestis,* Oxford 1954 (repr. 1987), p. xxv; A. P. Burnett, op. cit., 249.

6. A. N. Michelini, *Euripides and the Tragic Tradition,* Wisconsin 1987, p. 328.

7. D. J. Conacher «Structural Aspects of Euripides' *Alcestis*», in D. E. Gerber (ed.), *Greek Poetry and Philosophy: Studies in Honour of Leonard Woodbury,* California 1984, pp. 73-81.

8. M. Dyson, «Alcestis' Children and the Character of Admetus», *Journal of Classical Studies* CVIII (1988) 15-26.

tragedy where a mortal was faced by such dilemmas, concerning a god's gift. Perhaps Burnett was right in saying that Admetus had no choice. Perhaps his only choice was not to ask his wife to substitute her own death for his. As for the fact that he asked his friends and parents, we have to admit that he would not approach his enemies, but the people who – as he thought – cared for him. Admetus says in lines 954-961 that his enemies will accuse him of cowardice. He hears the same accusation by his father (702), but at this instance his father cannot be counted among those who are on Admetus' side. No final verdict is given in the play as far as Admetus' *andreia* is concerned. After all, this is of secondary value to the play's development. For the plot's sake – and probably, as the myth had already determined – Admetus *had* to accept the god's gift and Alcestis *had* to die in his place. It is, therefore, necessary not to view Admetus negatively *a priori*. The play itself does not allow such a notion. The king's moral value is determined mostly in the scenes with Pheres and Heracles.

It is the Pheres episode that provides the best material to those who choose to see Admetus as an «unpleasant «character study» (Dale, op.cit., p. xxiv). One of the arguments probably most contemptible to modern ears, is that Pheres should have offered to die in his son's stead, because he was an old man, past the age he could still expect anything from life (643-644). Old age and honour is a recurring theme in this stichomythia (658-659, 665-671, 725-727). Alcestis, too, had said to Admetus earlier on (290-294):

> καίτοι σ' ὁ φύσας χἠ τεκοῦσα προύδοσαν,
> καλῶς μὲν αὐτοῖς κατθανεῖν ἥκον βίου,
> καλῶς δὲ σῶσαι παῖδα κεὐκλεῶς θανεῖν.
> μόνος γὰρ αὐτοῖς ἦσθα, κοὔτις ἐλπὶς ἦν
> σοῦ κατθανόντος ἄλλα φιτύσειν τέκνα.

Whether this is an open accusation made by Alcestis against Admetus' parents, is not important now[9]. For the time being what is important is whether Alcestis expresses an opinion that most of the Athenians would have shared. Pericles' speech in the [Funeral Oration (Thuc. 2.44.4) comes into mind: Through the mouth of Pericles, Thucydides clearly implies that old age is useless (τὸ ἀχρεῖον). He says that those people who are old and past the age they could have children, should wish for their remaining life to be short,

9. M. Dyson, op. cit., 21, argues convincingly that «there is no word here for hatred, only the frank "betrayed" (προὔδοσαν 290), to contrast with her own sacrifice». When Admetus picks up the comparison at lines 336-341, the emotional charge is different; but this is because of Admetus' fiery temperament, which comes in contrast to the temperament of his wife.

and the only pleasing thing during old age is to be honoured. Of course, we have to bear in mind that this speech is παραινετικός, made in order to console the parents of the dead Athenians commemorated there[10]. It sounds strange to console people by telling them to wish for a short life, if they cannot have children. Could this really be part of Athenian morality? And what about the notion of having an honourable reputation before and after death? Pheres seems to disregard such notions. To Admetus' arguments he answers that he enjoys seeing the light as much as his son does (691) and that life is sweet, even if short (693). But what astonishes more is what is said in lines 725-726:

> ΑΔ. θανῇ γε μέντοι δυσκλεής, ὅταν θάνῃς.
> ΦΕ. κακῶς ἀκούειν οὐ μέλει θανόντι μοι.

Pheres' answer shocks Admetus who cries out: φεῦ φεῦ. τὸ γῆρας ὡς ἀναιδείας πλέων (727). An Athenian audience would have definitely shared Admetus' dismay at Pheres' nonchalant attitude. Honourable death was as important as honourable life for Athenians. One has only to remember plays like the *Antigone* and *Ajax*. On top of this, Plato epitomized the notion of honourable death in *Hippias Major*, 291 d-e: the ideal of every man is «to be rich and healthy and honoured by the Greeks, to reach old age and, having provided his dead parents with a fine funeral, to be finely and nobly buried by his own children». Bearing this in mind, it would be right to assume that, if the audience was astonished with Pheres, it was stunned by Admetus' manner in lines 734-740. There, Admetus repudiates his parents and throws them out of his home[11]. This is really shocking. Especially since Pheres has just demonstrated that he has fulfilled his parental duties to the utmost (681-690) and that if he does not want to die for his son, there is no law in Greece that demands parents to die for their sons (683-684). As Dyson (op.cit., 20) said, Pheres is not really a coward. He is simply «no worse than less than

10. Another part of the play bears comparison with Thucydides' speech: in lines 903-910 the chorus tries to console Admetus, who does not know how to bear his loss, by telling him the story of an old nobleman who, having lost his child, bore his sorrow «patiently through the grey downward years».

11. We have no reason to assume that the palace of Pherae is still the home of the old king, Pheres. In the *Odyssey*, Laertes lives retired in a small house outside the city. In other tragedies old kings appear next to their succesors (e.g. Cadmus in the *Bacchae*), but we cannot really tell whether the palace is still considered their own home. However, what Admetus says is confusing. In lines 736-737 he tells his father that they could never stay under the same roof with him, and in lines 737-738 he says that, if he had to repudiate from his father's ancestral home, he would do it. This probably means that Pheres kept different lodgings, outside the palace.

heroic». And what Admetus asks from his father is an act of heroism – a value that Pheres simply does not possess. It is difficult to imagine someone condemning a character for such a reason, even if this someone is a fifth-century Athenian, who watches a play set in the mythological past of the heroic era.

What about Admetus, though? He has gone too far in this scene. His behaviour towards his aged father is contrary to every sense of filial duty[12]. Certainly this would have struck the ancient audience. But one thing must be stressed here: it would be wrong to judge any of the characters in the play as if they remain unaltered. Admetus – as well as Alcestis, Pheres and Heracles – goes through various psychological changes during the course of the action. The Admetus we encounter in the Pheres episode is not the same person that he was at the beginning of the play, and he is not the Admetus of the end of the play. The audience is faced with an emotional outburst of the person who has just buried his wife and who considers his father responsible. This does not mean that Admetus is right. He is acting as no son should. Segal points out that, this is a conflict that is never resolved within the limits of the play[13]. Yet, we should not allow this episode alone to determine his characterization. The ancient audience, lacking the (dis)advantage of a written text, had to rely on a succession of continuous action in order to characterize Admetus, or anyone else. Different scenes evoke different emotional reactions, but after the end of the performance the audience is left with an overall image of each character. So, although Admetus' attitude cannot gain him the full support of the audience, it does not label him permanently as bad.

Heracles' arrival marks the starting point of a long line of moral conflicts for Admetus. The primary one is the conflict between his obligation as a host and his obligation as a mourning husband. Just before Alcestis' death Admetus promised her that (343-347):

> παύσω δὲ κώμους συμποτῶν θ' ὁμιλίας
> στεφάνους τε μοῦσάν θ' ἣ κατεῖχ' ἐμοὺς δόμους.
> οὐ γάρ ποτ' οὔτ' ἂν βαρβίτου θίγοιμ' ἔτι
> οὔτ' ἂν φρέν' ἐξαίροιμι πρὸς Λίβυν λακεῖν
> αὐλὸν· σὺ γάρ μου τέρψιν ἐξείλου βίου.

This is a moving promise, not extracted from Admetus but offered by him

12. M. Dyson, op. cit., 12-23, assesses Admetus much more positively in this scene.

13. C. Segal, *Euripides and the Poetics of Sorrow: Art, Gender and Commemoration in Alcestis, Hippolytus and Hecuba*, London 1993, p. 54.

out of his own free will, because he is «this kind of person». His reaction is due to his character, which has «something of the extraordinary, just like Alcestis and Heracles» (Dyson, op.cit., 21-22). It is the same sense of excessive grief that drove him to repudiate his father, which is at work here, too. It is the very emotional expression of utter devotion and appreciation for what Alcestis offered him. This is why so many modern critics share the chorus» dismay in lines 551-552:

τί δρᾷς; τοιαύτης συμφορᾶς προκειμένης,
Ἄδμητε, τολμᾷς ξενοδοκεῖν; τί μῶρος εἶ;

Bradley[14] was not convinced about Admetus' virtue in accepting the guest. Conacher (op.cit., 78) avoided a verdict as to how we are supposed to judge Admetus for this decision. Burnett (op.cit., 266) saw his decision as natural because Heracles was a friend. Let us attempt once more to determine Admetus' character in this particular part of the play – or rather, to determine how an ancient audience would have judged Admetus for his conduct.

Admetus' answer to the chorus' astonishment in lines 551-52 focuses on the reputation of the *oikos* and the importance of the institution of *xenia*. Segal («Admetus' Divided...», op.cit., 16-17) points out, that Admetus, unlike Alcestis, is concerned both with the public projection of the house and with the function of the inner *oikos*. Segal says that Alcestis sacrifices her life for the security of the household's interior: hearth, altars, bedchamber, storage rooms, and the chests and fabrics they contain (lines 160-188). I believe that this is wrong. Alcestis is as much concerned for the public projection of the *oikos* as her husband. Lines 324-325 indicate that Alcestis is aware of the reputation that she leaves for her family and, consequently, for her *oikos*. The difference is that Alcestis, as a woman, was expected to give priority to her concern about the household and Admetus, as a man, was expected to be more concerned with the *oikos'* public profile.

Admetus, as a ruler of the land (507, 510), cannot turn a guest away «from house and city» (553). At this point, one should remember that Heracles had said earlier on (538-544) that, since Admetus is in obvious mourning, he would go to another person's house (it is not necessary to imagine that this house would be in another city) and that he would still owe a favour to Admetus. However, Admetus chooses to accommodate Heracles without revealing to him that Alcestis is dead. As he says to the chorus, his circumstances would not have been made less painful if he had turned

14. E. M. Bradley, «Admetus and the Triumph of Failure in Euripides' *Alcestis*», *Ramus* 9 (1980) 112-127, 119.

Heracles away. In fact, he would have been blamed for discourtesy and his house would have been called inhospitable (563-567). This explanation is enough to shift the chorus toward Admetus again. Bradley is obviously wrong to reject this opinion (op.cit., 119). For what reason, then, does the chorus devote a whole choral ode to Admetus' hospitality, in lines 569-605? They are convinced by Admetus' reasoning. They remind the audience that Apollo blessed (even if with such an arduous gift) Admetus' house for his hospitality (570-587). Even the slave's complaints about Heracles (747-749) reveal that a lot of people have enjoyed the hospitality of Admetus' house. If so many people were accepted in this house, how could an old friend (776) like Heracles be turned away? Especially a friend who has often in the past offered hospitality to Admetus (559-560). In fact, the audience knows from lines 64-71 that Heracles will save the queen, and they should already guess that this will be Heracles' return for Admetus' hospitality. Yet, there are some arguments that seem to count against Admetus' good intentions. One of them is the fact that he accepted a guest in a house polluted by death[15]. Here, we must stress that Admetus does not accept Heracles in the actual house where Alcestis died. He orders the servant to prepare the «outer guest-rooms» (ἐξωπίους ξενώνας, 546-547) and he makes sure that the courtyard doors are shut (548-549). Perhaps these are attempts to shut the guest out of the polluted *oikos*. However, Heracles is no ordinary guest. He appears immune to pollution by death: he goes to the underworld to bring Alcestis back, and while Alcestis has to be purified from her contact with death (1144-1146) it is nowhere mentioned that Heracles is affected by pollution. The play makes clear that even a god is not immune to such pollution (22). Heracles, however lies between the world of gods and the world of mortals, because he is a demi-god. Perhaps the rules that apply to gods and mortals do not apply to him. At least so much can be deducted from this play.

Another point weighing against Admetus is the fact that he breaks the promise he made to Alcestis in lines 343-347 (cf. Bradley, op.cit.). Admetus had, indeed, promised to his dying wife, not to celebrate again. Bradley finds in lines 546-550, where Admetus makes the arrangements for Heracles' entertainment, a breach of his previous promise. What Bradley – or any other critic – fails to acknowledge, is that Admetus never celebrates with Heracles. He makes sure that the guest receives every possible attention (food, lodgings and entertainment), but he does not participate in the festivities in which

15. C. Segal, «Admetus Divided...», op. cit., 16. On the pollution of a house by death within see R. Parker, *Miasma: Pollution and Purification in Early Greek Religion*, Oxford 1983, p. 34ff, with note 27 on p. 39; also, D. C. Kurtz & J. Boardman, *Greek Burial Customs*, London 1971, p. 143f.

Heracles indulges. One could argue that Admetus neglects his duties as a host, since he does not spend time with his guest. Yet, I believe that for the biggest part of the Athenian audience Admetus did the right thing. There might have been some who did not approve, as lines 565-66 show. But the majority of the people would have acknowledged that, by admitting the guest without telling him the truth and by refraining from celebrating himself, Admetus managed to fulfil his funeral obligations and to maintain the reputation of his house as most hospitable (566-567). In fact, this is acknowledged both by Heracles (830, 855-860, 1013f, 1147-1148) and the chorus (569ff).

Yet, if the audience was persuaded along with the chorus that Admetus was right to accommodate a guest, how would they react to the final scene of the play? Many arguments have been expressed about Admetus' acceptance of Heracles' gift, the girl. Without knowing that she is really his wife, Admetus succumbs to Heracles' persistence and receives the unknown girl into his house (1026ff). A number of modern critics have condemned him for this[16]. Some others, though, saw this scene in a different light. Burnett (op.cit., 267) writes that, here Alcestis witnesses «a test of her husband's promised faithfulness. Only her corpse was present when Admetus quarreled, for her sake, with his father; now she hears him make public his plan to love and honour her, though she is dead, until he dies himself» (1085-1096). Of course, the question still remains, whether the acceptance of the girl by Admetus «*is* heroic» (Bradley, op.cit., 125). Would Alcestis or the audience view it in this way? In order to answer this we must ask ourselves whether Admetus does break his promise never to remarry (330-331) and never to enjoy other women (1090). As for the matter of marriage, it is obvious that Heracles does not bring the new girl as a bride. When he speaks about a prospect of a new marriage (1080) he speaks in general terms. He does not refer to the girl. But there is definitely a sexual connotation when he urges Admetus in lines 1035-1036. And Admetus' concern is obviously his sexual fidelity (1049-1069; cf. Dyson, op.cit., 22). He is not tempted by Heracles' ironical offer of a joyful reward (1101). His resistance breaks only when his friend begs the favor (1107) As Burnett says (p. 268),

> [...] his plain statements that he can have nothing to do with the girl (1056, 1090) have served to separate the threat to Alcestis from the threat to himself, and thus he agrees to receive the property of Heracles (at the cost of pain to himself), while he refuses to accept a substitute for his wife. In so acting he completes the salvation of

16. D. Conacher, op.cit., 81; A. Michelini, op.cit., 327; C. Segal, «Admetus' Divided...», op.cit., 21; id., *Euripides...*, op.cit., p. 56.

Alcestis (1020, 1119) and bears out the chorus' prediction that his aristocratic piety, incomprehensible to themselves, will find a reward at last (600-605, the close of the House of Admetus Ode). And in fact Admetus crosses his threshold not with his friend's property but with his own wife restored [...].

So, Admetus is not really pictured negatively. According to C. Segal (*Euripides...*, op.cit., p. 71), «the dubieties of Admetus' character, with its attendant ironies and ambiguities, certainly allow for a reading subversive of aristocratic patriarchy. But the modern reader's response on these issues is likely to be very different from the ancient spectator's». From what we have seen so far, Admetus' role was far from subversive. It projected him as a man who managed to solve a seemingly impossible conflict in the best possible way. He is a person who, despite fluctuations in his ability to judge right (i.e. the Pheres episode), remains admirable in the eyes of the audience. This is an important conclusion that we must keep in mind for the time being.

Alcestis' character seems more easy to assess. She, too, has had her share of negative criticism from modern interpreters. Beye (1959) regarded Alcestis as a woman who was «in no way concerned with the effect that her death will have upon her husband, other than it will be a strong deterrent to his re-marriage. His future welfare does not interest her. All in all there is a strong suggestion of a cold relationship throughout the early portion of the play; this much any audience could sense» (p. 126). This view has been rejected by Burnett (op.cit.) and Dyson (op.cit.), who suggest that if Alcestis did not love her husband her sacrifice does not make sense. A very central question of the play is raised here: what was Alcestis' logic behind her decision to sacrifice her life? Was it love for Admetus (177-180, 287), religious reverence (297-299), the duty of a wife toward her husband (282-284) or the expression of motherly concern (163-169, 288, 304-305, 371-373)?

Vellacott (1974, p. 17) focuses on lines 177-182, where Alcestis addresses her marriage-bed, saying «I am dying because I cannot bear to fail in my duty to you and my husband»[17]. He suggests that the chorus recognized this a wife's duty to her husband as being an ideal which is generally accepted and thought honourable (199-200, 226-243). In principle every husband would regard it as his due, without ever expecting to see it fulfilled (also see C. Segal, op.cit., 24). According to Vellacott, the ideal of marriage carries to its conclusion the universal assumption that a woman's life is a rational price for a man's life, being of less value. The women of a family are expendable, their lives at the disposal of men's lives (see e.g. *Iphigeneia in Tauris*, 1005-1006).

17. P. Vellacott, *Alcestis, Hippolytus, Iphigeneia in Tauris*, Suffolk 1953 (reissued with a revised text and new introduction in 1974).

«Admetus has never questioned this principle and is therefore hardly aware of it. Alcestis did not set this ideal for herself, but finding it already part of the fabric of society she embraced it with a thoroughness which was her own rare and heroic achievement» (p. 17). Vellacott is not right in saying that Admetus did not question such a principle. The Pheres episode, in connection with lines 15-16, shows that Admetus saw nothing «normal» in having his wife, instead of someone else, dying for him. However, the assumption that Alcestis' offer was her own achievement is very important. If there were any women in the ancient audience (as I believe there were), it would have been clear especially to them that Alcestis» choice was most probably the only «real» choice in her life as a woman. C. Segal (op.cit.) ponders upon the fact that «we cannot even be sure that Alcestis wants to be brought back» (22) when Heracles rescues her from the underworld. This idea of a woman's perception of self-sacrifice in those times can be illuminated by S. Maitland's *Andromeda* who, like Alcestis, is faced with a chance to save her family and her city by offering her own life:

> And only I could save them. I offered myself as a sacrifice for my city. The perfect sacrifice has to be offered voluntarily. I offered. What where my motives? Love, I say; my one true impulse of love. Perhaps there were other things in it too; things that were less pure, dark, poisoned things. But it was my decision for my life; my own moment of choice and I chose it. The mixture of joy and grief that greeted my offer confirmed me. They all needed me in a way that is very rarely offered to women[18].

Indeed, we must try to see life through the eyes of Alcestis, in order to understand her sacrifice. As a woman, her life was lived according to restrictions imposed by male relatives and sanctified by religion and politics. According to Athenian customs, she had no choice in her choice of a husband. After her marriage she had been supervised by her husband. And although she was a queen, it is implied by Admetus' lamentation in lines 941-950 that her function in the household was no different from that of Ischomachus' wife (in Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*): to supervise slaves, bring up and take care of children (Dyson, op.cit., 13-23) and be a bed-companion for her husband (Beye, op.cit., 125). The bond between husband and wife was legally defined and had clearly demarcated obligations: principally the procreation and care of legitimate children and the safeguarding and increase of household property[19]. Even if Alcestis' love was returned, she had to comply with these demands of the ideology of the times. So, if women were

18. S. Maitland, *Telling Tales*, London, West Nyack 1983, p. 98.

19. R. Just offers an excellent summary of women's rights and obligations in marriage (*Women in Athenian Law and Life*, 1989, pp. 43-50, 62-68, 72f).

present in the audience, they would have understood the meaning of Alcestis' actions. Since she could not choose how to live, she chose how to die. Her death certainly brought relief to some (i.e. Pheres, 621-622, 625-626), grief to others (Admetus and the children, and even the slaves, 192-195, 762-763), but most of all she was needed like no other woman was. As Pheres said, her brave deed brought fame upon the whole race of women (623-624). Unlike Pheres, Alcestis offered herself voluntarily, thus making it the perfect sacrifice. How could she have felt, once she was brought back by Heracles? Again, let us consider the thoughts of Maitland's *Andromeda*:

> [...] he stole my moment and made it his. I didn't know at once what had happened, but I did know, heart-breakingly, that something had gone absolutely and forever wrong. He could not allow anyone else so much as a single instant of courage or generosity. He stole it. He stole my moment, robbed me of my own choice, violated my sacrifice. He stole the one thing I had; stole it, possessed it and made it his own[20].

There is no denying the obvious: by bringing Alcestis back to life, Heracles un-does what she did. He diminishes the value of her sacrifice. With the exhibition of male omni-potency he manages to outweigh her ultimate heroism. In this way he restores the dominant patriarchal order again and the male pride of Admetus. «The husband, by association with his friend, has regained an aura of dignity, strength and heroism» (C. Segal, op.cit., 25).

Segal talks about destabilization of the house of Admetus. Like Vellacott (op.cit., 17), he sees the play as a critique of Athenian society's sharp division of roles and values between women and men (p. 9). He believes that, rather than providing a mirror-image of «normal» social conditions, tragedy tends to explore situations where the divisions have become problematical. «Alcestis» death, for example, which is the center of the action, is both normal and abnormal, both feminine and, in some sense, «masculine» in its courage. She is a precursor, in the domestic realm, of the nobly self-sacrificing virgins of Euripides' later plays» (p. 14). Later (p. 15) Segal draws attention to the heroic praise – usually «traditional for male valor» – that Alcestis receives, especially in lines 445-454[21]. The question is, what constitutes the destabilization of Admetus' house?

Irrespective of Alcestis' motives, her sacrifice raises issues potentially dangerous to Admetus and to society. Admetus' *oikos* is put into a delicate position, when the conflict between mourning obligations and *xenia* is raised.

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20. S. Maitland, op. cit., p. 100.

21. C. Segal, «Admetus' Divided...», op.cit., 15) quotes R. Garner, who has shown how echoes of Homeric and epinician poetry in the play consistently associate heroic values with Alcestis (R. Garner, «Death and Victory in Euripides' *Alcestis*», *Classical Antiquity* 7 [1988] 58-71).

The problem becomes all the more acute once we realize that Admetus' *oikos* is no ordinary *oikos*. It is the first *oikos* of the community, representative of the whole social and political structure of Pherae. We have seen how Admetus managed to resolve this conflict in the best possible way; we have also witnessed how Heracles restores «order», as far as male superiority is concerned. However, the crossing of male-female boundaries by Alcestis and Admetus still imply a sense of disorder which remains un-restored.

For Alcestis the crossing of her gender's boundaries is twofold. The meaning of her «masculine» courage applied in the sphere of the household is positive. She dies in order to allow the head of the family to continue providing for the *oikos*, and in order to enable her children to remain legitimate heirs of their ancestral wealth and social status (l.304). But her absence creates a lot of problems for her husband. His role as a man is reversed. C. Segal (1993, pp. 62-72) comments on Admetus' un-manly presentation in his exhibition of intense grief (897-99) and weeping (826f., 1045-48). The loss of emotional control and Admetus' preoccupation with his marriage bed (347-353, 886, 925, 945, 1090), more common for women than men (cf. Alcestis in 175ff.), strengthen his crossing of masculine boundaries. This is a problem created by Alcestis. In this sense her sacrifice prefigures disorder.

As Segal (op.cit., 16) puts it, domestic heroism is both destabilizing and reassuring:

> It is destabilizing, as many have noted, in the enforced passivity and deheroization of its male protagonist. It is reassuring to a male audience and to the dominantly male values of the society in that it begins and ends with different forms of male fantasies: at the beginning the wife gives her life for her husband; at the end, the rescue of Alcestis validated the prowess of a great hero in an exclusively masculine dialogue about the exchange of women.

Furthermore, for some of people of Pherae Admetus' acceptance of his wife's sacrifice still remains an incomprehensible act of cowardice (953-961). In lines 960-961 Admetus cries out: «What have I gained with my life, being so wretched in fact, and having so wretched a reputation?» Dyson (1988, p. 18) provides the answer: «It is Admetus alone and not the children whose reputation will be directly affected. Both will be able to boast of the virtues of wife and mother respectively (323-325), but only in the children's case there will be no unfortunate backlash».

However, as we have seen from the examination of Admetus' character, the overall impression the audience is left with, is the impression of a man who did the best in the worst circumstances and resolved conflicts that seemed impossible to compromise. At the beginning of the play it is said that

Admetus would be rewarded for his ὁσιότης (19-20). This is stressed again at the end of the play (1147-1148). As for Alcestis, it is clear that, despite of the (un)intentional disorder that she causes on a level broader than the actual household, her sacrifice is in the best interest of the *oikos* and for this sacrifice she gains fame θεοῖσι ὁμοίως (996). Could it be, then, that both Admetus and Alcestis were regarded as generally admirable characters? Judged from modern social and moral perspectives such a statement could be hard to make. But, as has become clear, such an opinion should be expected from an ancient audience. So, what was the purpose of a play that presented two admirable protagonists?

Before we answer this question we should consider the importance of the *oikos* in this play. It receives special attention right from the beginning. Apollo, in his opening speech, expresses himself with a lot of affection for the house in which he has lived so long (1-2, 9) and he stresses that it is only fear of pollution by death that forces him to leave the roofs of the house that is «dear» to him (22-23). Later on, we are given an opportunity of a detailed encounter with the interior of Admetus' house. It is in the slave's speech (151-198) that we see the image of the secure household that Alcestis, by the sacrifice of her life, will keep unchanged after her death, free of possible disruptions by a second wife and stepmother (cf. 302ff.). Admetus is constantly concerned about the reputation of his *oikos* (566-567, 1057f.). After the offer of hospitality to Heracles, the chorus celebrates the outward reach of the house in hospitality both to man and god (569-605). C. Segal (1992, p. 18) draws attention to lines 575ff. and 590-596 of the choral ode, where the geographical limits of Admetus' power are defined. Attention is refocused from the inward to the outward orientation of the house. Beginning and ending with praise of Admetus' hospitality (569-571, 597-605), the ode correlated this external extension of the power and property of the house with its openness to strangers from the outside. So, every single person in the play (Apollo, Alcestis, Admetus, the chorus and even the slaves [747-747, 764]) is concerned about the *oikos*' welfare both on a private and a public level. It appears that every human decision reflects upon the household and even stems from consideration of it.

The emergence of the *oikos* as an economic and political as well as a biological and social unit is discussed by H. P. Foley[22]. Laws protected the household as an economic unit: the marriage laws concerning the *epikleros* guaranteed a male heir to each *oikos*. Pericles' citizenship law of 450-451 restricted citizenship to people whose parents were both Athenians,

22. H. P. Folley, *Reflections of Women in Antiquity*, London 1981, p. 150f.

establishing the Athenian community as a social unit controlled by large-scale endogamy. The preservation of the individual *oikos* provides a firm basis for the larger community by ensuring economical and social stability; even inter-social bonds with other communities can be achieved and maintained through individual *oikoi* (cf. 747-749, 559-560). The play draws attention to the importance of such issues. It warns against the social dangers implied when private order is disrupted. The centrality of the *oikos* in this play is indicative of an attempt to validate its proper function, which is based on gender division. The unsettling of gender-order in the *Alcestis* threatens the orderly existence of the house and this reflects on the rest of society. However, in the most paradoxical way Alcestis' unsettling of gender roles profits the *oikos*, even if only in a narrow domestic level. Admetus transgresses the boundaries of his gender, too, but he manages to solve problems that Alcestis created by her death; by solving these problems he secures the stability of the *oikos* which was Alcestis' primary concern.

A complex pattern is revealed in this play, as far as Admetus, Alcestis and Apollo are concerned: for his sense of hospitality, Admetus earns his life by losing his wife, and then he wins her back for the same reason. Seen this way, the god's gift proves worthless. After the end of the play, the natural order is only partly restored: Admetus' day to die had come; someone else died in his place; this someone was restored back to life; Admetus continues living although his day to die has passed (45). Universal order is upset by Apollo[23]. In this sense, Apollo accomplishes what his son, Asclepius, was killed for by Zeus (3-4, 123-129): to bring people back from the dead. Only this time, Apollo is not punished, as happened before (5-8). I believe that, what Apollo accomplished with his «empty gift» was the revealing of the personality of the characters involved. Whether he, as a god of prophecy, knew right from the beginning that Alcestis would be the one who would offer to die is another point. If he did, then one could say his gift was harmful to Admetus, because with his wife offering to die for him, Admetus loses face in society (Conacher, op.cit., p. 81; Dyson, op.cit., 18). This is not true either because Apollo offers his gift in earnest care for the *oikos* of Admetus (9-10), and because Admetus gains glory for managing to fulfil his obligations both to his dead wife and to his guest (569-605), and Alcestis gains glory for sacrificing her life for her husband (995-1005). Certainly, the *oikos* gains in reputation from the glory of its owners, and at the end of the day, this is really what Apollo's gift was all about.

23. Apollo has already upset the universal order by using δόλος, in order to trick the Fates, who control death and consequently, destiny (11-14).

Concluding the examination of the play, a few words on Alcestis' «prominence». As far as women are concerned, this play is didactic in a paradoxical way. On a narrowly domestic level, Alcestis can be characterized as a role model for Athenian women. However, her heroism is potentially destructive for the *oikos*, since it upsets the delicate balance of gender roles – a balance which is vital not only for the well-being of the *oikos*, but also for the society itself.

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