

EURIPIDES'
"ALCESTIS"
Produced in 438BCE
At the City Dionysia
Awarded 2nd prize

TRANSLATED BY
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Dramatis Personae

Admetus
(King of Pherae)
Alcestis
(Wife to Admetus)
Pheres
(Admetus' father)
Apollo
(the god)
Thanatos
(Priest of the dead)
Maid
Man Servant
Eumelus
(Young son of the royals)
Girl
(Young daughter of the royals -silent)
Herakles
Chorus
(Men of Pherae)
Various court attendants
(Silent)

Before the main gates of Admetus' palace at Pherae, in Thessaly.

There are three gates, the central one used only by the main occupants and Herakles, the other two by the slaves.

The gates open and Apollo emerges. He is a tall god, with long blond curls draping his shoulders. He is wearing a laurel garland on his head and a bow and a quiver hang across his chest.

Clean shaven. Short tunic. Bare chest.

He speaks to the audience.

Apollo: Indicating the palace

This is Admetus' palace and here it was where I, a god, was forced to share a table with a slave. Father Zeus' idea, of course! He shot one of his thunder bolts right into my son Asclepius' chest and killed him, so, I got angry and killed all the Cyclopes, the beasts who do all of his fire work. Father got angrier still so he punished me by putting me into the service of a mortal. Admetus. I protected his household and looked after his herds of cows.

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He is a good, god fearing man, Admetus, son of old Pheres, and I, of course am a god, so, I saved his life. I did this by playing a trick on the Fates.

I made these goddesses promise me that they'd let Admetus live if he could exchange his corpse for someone else's. Some corpse or other had to be delivered to the underworld, you see and so, all

Admetus had to do was to find a replacement and he could escape his own immediate death. Well, the king went all around the palace and asked everyone, his father, his mother, the very people who gave birth him – everyone, near and dear to him- to see if anyone was willing to die in his stead. He found only one person willing to do that, to die for him and to never see the light of day for him and that was his wife, Alcestis.

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She's in there, now, in his arms, breathing her last because Fate has decreed that this is the very day she must die.

Of course, I being a god, must not be polluted by anything that's going on in the chambers of that friendly palace and so I must now leave it.

He looks into the distance of SR.

Ah! He's here already! Thanatos himself! The Priest of the dead! He'll be taking the queen to the halls of Hades, soon! Punctual god, this one. He must have been waiting anxiously for this moment.

Enter Thanatos. Total contrast to Apollo. Tall, wild looking man. Long black, unkempt hair. Black cape with extended shoulder pads, wielding a menacing sword.

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Thanatos:

What are you doing here, Apollo? Why are you hanging around the palace this time, ey, Apollo? Up to your old tricks again? Depriving the gods below of their rightful honours, cutting away at their rights, ey? Isn't it enough that you prevented Admetus' death by fooling the Fates into letting Admetus live with such a sly, dirty, cunning trick? And now, now I can see you all armed to the teeth with bows and arrows, no doubt trying to prevent the death of his replacement, Pelias' daughter, Alcestis!

Apollo:

Fear not, Thanatos. My reasons for being here are good and honourable.

Thanatos:

If that is so, then why the bows and arrows?

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Apollo:

Force of habit. I always carry them with me.

Thanatos:

And to give unreasonable protection to this household, right?

Apollo:

I am here because the suffering of friends weighs heavily on me.

Thanatos:

So are you trying to deprive me of a second death?

Apollo:

Listen, Thanatos! I didn't use force even with the first one!

Thanatos:

So, why is he still up here, above the soil and not below it, down, in the underworld?

Apollo:

Because his spot has been changed with that of his wife. That's what you're here for, isn't it? To take her away?

Thanatos:

That's right. And I'll be taking her down to Hades with me.

Apollo:

Well, I doubt very much that I can persuade you to change your mind, so, take her and go. She's all yours.

Thanatos:

You? Persuade me? About who I can or can't, kill? Ha! Choosing the dead is my job! I'm under orders to perform that very job!

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Apollo:

No, I don't want to persuade you about who you can or can't kill. Just to try and... postpone their death a bit.

Thanatos:

O, I see! Now I see what you're up to!

Apollo:

So, tell me, then, Thanatos: is there no way Alcestis can reach old age?

Thanatos:

No way! None whatsoever! If you must know, I, too, enjoy the dignity of my office.

Apollo:

Yeah, but one way or another, you'll still get your single life. Whether it's now or later, it will still be the one life!

Thanatos:

The younger they are the bigger the glory!

Apollo:

Still, the older she dies the more wealth she'll take down there with her on her burial day.

Thanatos:

Apollo, you're trying to set an unfair precedent here! It's a law that will favour the rich!

Apollo:

O, I can see you're a deep thinker, Thanatos! A true philosopher.

Thanatos:

Can't you see? Anyone with money would try and buy long life! All the poor would die young.

Apollo:

So, you won't grant me that little favour then?

Thanatos:

Absolutely not. You know what I'm like!

Apollo:

Yes, I do. I know what you're like all right. The mortals hate you and the gods spit in your eye!

Thanatos:

Apollo, you can't always have more than you deserve!

Apollo:

Now you listen to me, Thanatos! No matter how rude and crude and raw you are, one way or another, you'll be made to do the right thing. There's a man coming here, to Phereas' palace, today. Someone, a man, who king Eurystheus has sent to Thrace to get him back his horses and chariot, away from the heavy winters of that place; well, this man will change your ways. This man will stay here, in this palace as a guest and he will take the queen away from you whether you like it or not. That way, Thanatos, not only will I not owe you any favours but I will also be able to continue to hate you.

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Thanatos:

What a lot of nonsense! Nonsense will get you nowhere, Apollo! The Queen will be heading down to the underworld –whether you like it or not! Down into Hades' chambers, Apollo! I'm going to see her right now; chop off some of her hair with this sword, here. And that little chop will mean she'll become a holy offering to all the gods below this earth.

Exit Apollo through SR and Thanatos through the middle gate of the palace

Enter the Chorus of Pherean men. They look around the palace and are surprised.

Chorus:

How quiet it is around Admetus' palace!

Chorus:

I wonder what it all means.

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Chorus:

There's no one around from her family to tell us if we should be mourning the Queen's death or celebrating the fact that she can still see the light of day.

Chorus:

The way I and everyone else see it, Pelias' daughter, Alcestis, has no equal on this Earth, in her loyalty to her husband.

They listen intently for a few seconds but hear nothing.

Chorus:

Can anyone hear any sounds of grief in there? The sound of someone sighing or that of hands beating hard at the breast, in despair, as if it's all over?

They listen again

Chorus:

No, nothing!

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Chorus:

There's no servant out here to tell us what's going on, either.

God of healing, Apollo! If only you could come and avert the crushing waves of this terrible Fate!

Chorus:

Listen, if the Queen has died the place wouldn't be so quiet.

Chorus:

I fear she's dead!

Chorus:

But you can see, she hasn't been taken out of the house yet!

Chorus:

See what? I'm not so sure. What makes you so certain she hasn't already been taken out to be buried?

Chorus:

Because surely Admetus would have mourners accompanying her body to the burial ground.

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Chorus:

I can't see the libation basin that people place outside their house when they're mourning the death of a loved one.

Chorus:

Nor can I see the lock of hair cut from the dead person's head next to the door.

Chorus:

And I can't hear the loud sound of women's hands beating their chest in grief.

Chorus:

Still, today is the day she's supposed to die.

Chorus:

What do you mean?

Chorus:

This is the day that Fate has declared she must go to the underworld.

Chorus:

O, your words have crushed my heart! They have crushed my soul!

Chorus:

Life-long loyal friends should mourn the death of the virtuous.

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Chorus:

Ah! There is no shrine upon this earth where one can send her soul, even by ship, no shrine that can save our unfortunate Queen. There is no shrine on earth that can release her soul from this fateful burden. Not Lycia nor Ammon's dry seat.

Chorus:

Her merciless Fate of death approaches.

Chorus:

And I know of no other altar, no altar where they sacrifice sheep that I may turn to, no altar where I can pray for her life.

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Chorus:

Only Apollo's son, Asclepius, only he, if here alive and living among those who see the light of the Sun, only he could let our Queen leave behind Hades' dismal chambers and come back to us, up here, above the soil. Only he could raise the dead. Only he could resurrect them. But then, Zeus hurled a lightning bolt at him and killed him.

Now, I cannot see anywhere the slightest hope that she will live.

All the chorus search the sides of the stage for a few seconds, looking far into the distance within.

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Chorus:

The altar of every god is dripping with the blood of sacrifices that the king has performed to try and save her but there is no escaping Fate.

A side door of the palace opens and a tearful Maid appears

Chorus:

Ah, look! One of the maids has come out of the palace. She's in tears. I wonder what it is she'll tell us about the Queen's fate.

Chorus: *To the Maid*

Old lady, it is certainly proper for a servant to grieve for her master's misfortune but could you tell us what we're all anxious to know: is our Queen alive and breathing, or has she passed away?

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Maid:

Both. You can say she's both, alive and dead.

Chorus:

What are you saying, old maid? How can a person be alive and dead both at the same time?

Maid:

She's in bed breathing her last. She's dying!

Chorus:

Is there no hope at all then, to save her life?

Maid:

No, none. The moment of her death is fast approaching.

Chorus:

Have all the preparations for the funeral been made?

Maid:

Yes. The fine clothes in which her husband will bury her are ready.

Chorus:

Poor king! Such a good husband to lose such a good wife!

Maid:

My king will not feel the true extent of his loss until after it happens.

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Chorus:

Then let your mistress know, old maid, that she will die a most virtuous woman, the most noble of all the women under the sun, for a very long time.

Maid:

Most noble and most virtuous indeed. And why not? Who can say otherwise? What could a woman do to be more so? How could a woman show her devotion to her husband better than how she did it? She has sacrificed her life in order to save his.

Everyone in the city knows this, of course but you'd be amazed to hear how she behaved inside the palace.

The moment she heard that the fatal hour has arrived for her, she went to the river and there she washed her fair body.

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Then she came home and from her cedar wardrobes she took out her finest clothes and dressed herself in a very dignified way. Then she went and stood in front of the hearth and prayed to the goddess.

"Goddess, Lady Hestia," she prayed. "Protector of the hearth, I am now going to the world below the Earth so I beg of you to grant me this last request: Take care of my orphaned children. Give my son a woman who will make a loving partner for him and, for my daughter, give her a virtuous husband. Let not their life be cut short as mine has been and let them live long and happy lives, here in the land of their ancestors."

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That was her prayer. Then, she went to all the altars in Admetus' palace and prayed again at each one and put garlands of myrtle around them.

Not a sigh, not a groan out of her! The disaster that was about to befall her had not touched the beauty of her face.

Only when she returned to her bedroom did her tears fall. She fell upon it and in a flood of tears she spoke to it. "O, marriage bed," she said, to it. "Here, on this bed, I have given my virginity to my husband for whom now I must also give my life. Farewell, my marriage bed! Because I did not want to betray you or to betray my husband, I must now die. A new woman will now take you, a woman perhaps luckier than me but certainly not more virtuous."

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Then she kissed it and the flood of tears that poured from her eyes soaked all the sheets. Then, when she was exhausted from her crying, she got up from the bed, wondered around the palace aimlessly for a while, going in and out of all the rooms with her head down, until, finally, she went back into her bedroom and again, fell upon the bed. Her children were holding tightly at their mother's gown, now, crying. Like a woman who knew she was about to die, their mother picked them up, hugged them close to her chest and kissed them, first the one and then the other.

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All the palace servants were also crying pitifully because of the terrible Fate that befell their mistress. She stretched her right hand out to them all -each and every one of them!- respecting even the most humble of them and said 'good bye' to them and they, in turned bid her farewell.

Such are the dire troubles in Admetus' palace! Whether he died or not, the pains he is suffering are so great that he will never forget them.

Chorus:

Weighty troubles, indeed! Admetus must feel absolutely horrible, losing such a wonderful wife!

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Maid:

He's holding his poor wife in his arms and mourns her loss. He begs her not to leave him. But he's trying to do the impossible because the poor woman is now in the grips of her illness and is fast losing strength, withering like a flower, her body nothing more than a sick and a meagre weight for his arms. A body barely breathing, barely able to raise itself from the bed a body desperately searching for some of the Sun's rays.

She wants to take one last look at the Sun's bright circle of rays.

But let me go and announce your visit. Not everyone wishes their ill masters well or give them any support in their hour of need but you are their old and true friends.

Exit Maid into the Palace through the side entrance

213

Chorus:

O, Zeus! Where can one find a means by which our king and queen can escape their terrible Fate? Show us the way out of this dreadful catastrophe!

A short but anxious wait for the palace door to open

Chorus:

Ah! Will anyone come out of the palace? Should I cut my hair and wear black robes in mourning?

Chorus:

It is clear my friends! Alcestis' Fate is very clear! Still, let us pray to the gods! Let us pray to them because their power is most great.

220

Chorus:

O, Paean! O Lord of Healing! Find some means by which Admetus can escape his misfortune!

Chorus:

Yes, Lord Paean! Help! Come and help poor Admetus just as you have helped him before! Come! Stop Hades from performing his murderous work! Save Admetus!

Chorus:

Poor, poor Admetus! Poor son of Pheres! What a ghastly misfortune this is you are suffering, to have such a wife as Alcestis, taken away from you!

Chorus:

A misfortune that makes one want to say, "I'd rather use my sword against me! I'd rather kill myself than suffer this."

Chorus:

I'd rather put a noose around my neck and hang myself, dangling high, between the Heavens and the Earth than suffer such a loss!

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Chorus:

Because, Admetus, your wife is not simply a wife to you but she is the dearest woman in your life and today, Admetus, today, you will see her dead.

Enter Alcestis from the palace. She is very weak and is helped to walk by Admetus. Their two children (a boy and a girl) follow, holding their mother's gown.

A number of servants carry out a couch which they place in front of the Palace. (Down Stage)

Chorus:

Look! Look there! She and her husband are coming out of the palace!

Chorus: *To the audience. Wailing.*

O, cry! All of you cry! Groan, all you people of the land of Pheres! Sigh for the most excellent of all wives! Sigh for her who is withering under an illness that will take her to Hades' world below!

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Chorus:

I will never again say that marriage brings more joy than misery. I saw this many times before and I see it now with this king who must live an unbearable life now that he will lose his wonderful wife.

Alcestis: *Looking up, weakly.*

The Sun! The light of day! The clouds that whirl about across the sky!

Admetus:

He sees us, from up there. Apollo, the bright Sun-god sees these two unfortunate people who've committed no sin but who must still suffer your death.

Alcestis:

The Earth! The Palace roof! The marriage bed of my ancestral land, of Iolcus!

250

Admetus:

Come, wife, have courage! Don't leave me! Come, pray to the almighty gods who have your life in their hands. Ask them to be merciful.

Alcestis:

Ah! I can see the small boat on the lake. The boat with the two oars; and Charon, the ferryman of the dead, holding onto the barge pole. His hand is stretched out towards me and he's calling out to me, "Hurry up! Stop wasting time! You're holding me back!"

Ah! He's calling for me, he wants me to rush.

Admetus:

Ah, how bitter is the journey you speak of, Alcestis! Unfortunate wife! What suffering we must endure!

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Alcestis: *Grabs at Admetus' shoulders and shouts desperately.*

Ah! He's taking me, Admetus! He's taking me away. Can you not see him? He wants to take me down, down to the court of the dead!

Look there! There he is! Winged Hades is near us... His eyes are spitting angry fire beneath his brows!

Addressing Hades

What? What do you want? No! No, let me go!

O, I am such an unfortunate woman! What a dreadful journey I am forced to make!

Admetus:

A dreadful journey, indeed, wife! A journey that makes us all, especially me and the children weep!

Your pain is our pain, too!

Alcestis: *still addressing Hades*

Leave me! Let me go!

To the servants.

Come, servants, help me lie down. My knees are weak. Hades is near now. Darkness has flooded my eyes.

My darling children! You have no mother now. Farewell, my darlings. Live, my children! Live and enjoy the light of the sun!

273

Admetus:

How sad these words sound to my ear! There's more pity in them than there is in death itself!

By the gods, wife! By the gods, I beg you! Don't leave me! In the name of the children whom you leave behind as orphans, be strong, wife! Be strong and have courage. If you leave me I, too, will be lost. Whether we live or die is in your hands, dear wife, because we hold your love sacred.

280

Alcestis: *Recovering a little and answers Admetus more directly.*

Admetus, you can see for yourself how close to death I am so listen to my final wish.

I have given your life priority over mine and for that, you will be able to look upon the sun and I, in your stead, will die. I could have avoided this and, instead, after your death, I could have married anyone I wished in Thessaly and lived in the wealth of another noble house. But my heart could not endure being left here with my orphaned children without you and so I put aside the gifts that come with youth, great and sweet though they might be.

Your own parents have abandoned you, though, at their age, if they had died in your stead, they could have achieved a double glory, that of saving your life and that of leaving this world honourably. You are their only son and there is no hope for them to have another child. You and I would still live out our lives to their full and you wouldn't now be lamenting the loss of your wife. Nor would you need to raise orphaned children.

But this has been brought about by some god or other. So, let it be.

Admetus, I want you to be grateful for what has happened and to give something back in gratitude.

300

No, I won't ask you to pay a price equal to the one I'm paying. No, life is more precious than everything else. But I do want you to do what is proper. Surely you'll agree to do that because, unless you've lost your wits, you love these two children as much as I do. Keep our children as lords of our house. Don't marry another woman who'll be less virtuous than me. Don't let a stepmother rule them, a stepmother who, because of envy, will handle them – your children and mine – harshly.

I beg you, Admetus, don't do that because, to a stepmother, Admetus, the children of his former wife are an enemy, a more hateful enemy than a snake.

310

She strokes the head of her son

A boy always has a strong ally in his father.

Turns to the daughter

But you, my darling daughter, how will you manage to grow up honourably, through the years of your childhood? What sort of a woman will you see living with your father? I hope that she won't disgrace your name with hateful smears in the prime of your life, my darling and destroy your marriage prospects.

Poor girl! Your mother won't be there at your wedding, she won't be there, with you, my sweet, helping you with your own labour at childbirth, a time when a mother's presence is most comforting.

320

No, darling, I can't do any of this because I must die. Not tomorrow, not the day after but right now, my darling, right now. This very minute I shall suffer this awful disaster. This very minute I shall add to the numbers of the dead.

To all of them

Good bye to you all!

And you, my husband, Admetus, you can rightly boast of having had the best of wives and you, my children that the best mother in the world has given birth to you.

Chorus:

Courage, my queen!

Chorus:

I can speak on Admetus' behalf without hesitation and say that he'll definitely act according to your wishes. That is if he hasn't lost his mind.

Admetus:

Have no fear, Alcestis. Have no fear. I shall do as you say.

I called you "wife" while you were alive and you will still be called my wife after you die. In the whole of Thessaly there will never be another woman who will talk with me in the same way that you did, as a wife.

330

There is no woman in the world who is born from as noble a family as you, nor one who is as beautiful as you. As for the children, Alcestis. I am content. I only wish the gods grant me the full joy of them, joy that they have deprived me by your death.

My mourning for your loss, Alcestis, will last not a year but my whole life and I shall hate my parents, despise my mother and father who loved me only with words but not with deeds.

340

But you, wife, so as to save my own life you gave me what is the dearest thing in the world, you gave me your own life. How can I not mourn the loss of such a wife?

I will stop now all the banquets and the garlands, all the joyous parties and the visitors, all that music that echoed throughout our palace. I'll never touch a lyre again nor lift my spirits with the Lydian flute because your loss, wife, takes with it all the joy of living.

349

I shall call a skilled craftsman to make an image of you, which I will put in our bed and embrace it lovingly, calling out your name, my beloved, believing that it is you that I am embracing. It will be a cold joy, my love but one that I think might lighten the weight of the loss just a little. And if you visit me in my dreams my joy will be even greater. It is a sweet thing to see one's loved ones in dreams, even though it is for a short time.

I wish I had the voice and music of Orpheus! Nothing could stop me from bringing you back from Hades.

360

I would have enchanted Demeter's daughter and her husband with songs and neither Pluto's dog nor Charon, that old ferryman of souls, could have stopped me from rushing down there and returning you up here in the light of the sun.

But wait for me, Alcestis, wait for me and make a place for me next to you so that I can stay with you always when I, too, die.

I'll tell our children to bury me in the same cedar coffin as you, so that we can be side-by-side, always.

I don't want to be separated from you even in death, my one and only true and faithful wife.

Chorus: *To Admetus*

I, too, Admetus, will share in your grief and mourn with you, a friend losing a friend. She deserves it.

371

Alcestis: *To the children*

You heard your father, my loves. He will not betray me and nor will he place another woman over you.

Admetus:

I repeat my promise. I will do just as I said.

Alcestis guides the children towards Admetus

Alcestis:

Then abide by your word and accept these children from me.

Admetus receives them in his arms.

Admetus:

I accept them. A dear gift from the hands I love.

Alcestis:

And so, you now must become their mother also, just as I have been.

Admetus:

It is necessary for me to do so, since they'll be orphaned of their real mother.

Alcestis:

I'm leaving you, my darlings. I'm going down to the underworld when I should be up here, alive, with you!

380

Admetus:

O, Alcestis! How can I live alone, without you?

Alcestis:

Time heals the living but the dead are nothing.

Admetus:

Take me with you, wife! Please!

Alcestis:

No. It is enough that I die for you.

Admetus:

O, Hades! Hades, what a precious wife you steal from me!

Alcestis:

Ah! My vision darkens and my eyes are growing heavy already.

Admetus:

If you go I, too, will be lost!

Alcestis:

I am finished. I exist no more. Declare me dead now!

Admetus:

Courage, my darling! Lift up your face! Do not abandon your children!

Alcestis: Gently turning her head away from the children

Darlings, I'm leaving you against my wish! Farewell to you both.

Admetus:

Wife! Look at your children! Look at them!

390

Alcestis:

I am gone! I am dead!

Admetus:

What are you doing, wife? Are you really leaving me?

Alcestis:

Farewell, husband!

Alcestis falls dead onto the couch. The chorus runs to her and examines her.

Admetus:

O, I am lost!

Chorus:

She's gone! Admetus' wife is dead!

Eumelus:

Ah! What a horrible Fate!

My mother has gone down to the Underworld!

She's gone, father! The sun can no longer see her!

She's gone and left our life motherless.

Ah! Her eyes are closed and her hands are motionless.

He bends down and kisses her

Mother! Mother! Hear me! Hear me, mother, I'm calling you, I'm begging you, mother!

Mother, it is me! Me, your darling son! Mother, I am kissing you and I'm talking to you.

Mother!

404

Admetus:

She cannot see, my son. She cannot hear!
What a dreadful disaster has fallen upon all of us!

Eumelus:

I'm still a child, father! Still young yet I'm torn from my dear mother's arm!
I'm left to wonder through life all alone.
Disasters are falling upon me and upon you, too, my dear, little sister!

411

And you, my father! What a bitter end to your marriage! What a terrible waste!
Fate has not let you enjoy old age with your wife. She is dead now!
Mother! Your death has killed our household!

Chorus:

Courage Admetus. Courage. You must try and endure this disaster. You're neither the first nor will you be the last who has lost a noble wife.
You must accept the fact that we are all fated to die.

420

Admetus:

I know this. This misfortune has not just arrived suddenly and it was not unexpected. I expected it and agonised over it for a long time now.
Stay with me now and help me bury my wife. Sing the sad dirge appropriate to the pitiless god of the underworld.

A public proclamation

I hereby command all the people of Thessaly, whom I rule, to join me in my mourning by wearing black and by cutting their hair.
And all you folk who have horses for harnessing or steeds for riding, shear their manes with iron blades.

Let no sounds of the lyre or the flute be heard in the city for twelve full moons.

431

I bury someone most dear to me, one who will never be surpassed in her loyalty to me. She deserves all honours for sacrificing her life for me.

The servants pick up Alcestis' body and exit into the palace, followed by Admetus and the children.

Chorus:

Oh, Alcestis, Pelias' daughter!

Chorus 2:

Goodbye! I hope joy is not too far away from you, down there, in Hades' sunless chambers.

439

Chorus:

Let the god with the black hair, Hades and that old man who sits at the tiller and works the oar, that ferryman of souls, Charon, let those two be certain that never has a woman more virtuous than Alcestis been carried across the lake Acheron.

Chorus:

The poets, Alcestis! The poets will sing of you often! And often they'll play the seven-stringed lyre, the mountain lyre the one made of tortoise shell.

Chorus:

And they'll cry also even without the lyre, in Sparta, when the seasons in their turning bring round the month of Carnies and its Festival, the night when the moon hangs high and full for the whole night.

452

Chorus:

And they'll sing your praise in Athens also, Alcestis. In that city, Athens, my queen! A city radiant in its wealth. The grief of your death will inspire all the poets in the world.

Chorus:

Oh, how I wish! O, my queen how I wish that it was within my power to bring you back into the sunlight, to pull you out of Hades' deep rooms, to work the oar above the streams of Kokytus.

Chorus:

Because you, my dear queen, you alone, had the courage to give your life to Hades in exchange for the life of your husband. May the soil fall lightly upon your body, my queen!

Chorus:

And if your husband calls for another woman to come to his bed, he'll be despised not only by your children but by me also.

Chorus:

No one else dared to die for your husband!

Chorus:

Neither his mother nor his father, both of whom have already lived long enough, whose hair is fully white, neither of them wanted to go down to the underworld to save your husband's life.

469

Chorus:

Their own child! Neither of them had the courage to save their child from this harsh fate and that's why it fell upon you, such a young woman, to die for him.

Chorus:

How I wish I could have such a wife! They are very rare, indeed, in this world.

Enter Herakles. He is wearing his characteristic lion skin and carrying a wooden club.

Herakles:

Friends! You, men who live here, in the land of Pherae, tell me, is Admetus home?

Chorus:

Yes, Herakles, Phere's son is here. He's inside but what brings you here, in this Thessalian city of Pherae?

Herakles:

I've got to perform a task for Eurystheus, king of Tiryns.

Chorus:

And where is this task taking you? What sort of a task is it?

Herakles:

I have to go and get that four-horse chariot from Diomedes, the king of Thrace.

Chorus:

How are you going to do that? Do you have any idea what sort of a man that foreigner is?

Herakles:

No idea. I've never been to the land of the Bistonians.

Chorus:

They'll give you a strong battle for those horses, that's for sure.

Herakles:

Still, I can't avoid the task.

Chorus:

Kill or be killed, Herakles. Either you'll return alive or leave your bones there.

Herakles:

This isn't the first time I've had to go through such a test.

490

Chorus:

And will there be some other, extra reward for you if you defeat the owner of those horses?

Herakles:

Well, I'll be taking the horses to Eurystheus, the king of Tiryns.

Chorus:

Putting the bit between the jaws of those horses won't be easy.

Herakles:

Sure it will, unless, of course, their nostrils breathe out fire.

Chorus:

No they don't but those fast jaws of theirs, chop men up into little bits.

Herakles:

Human flesh is the food of mountain beasts not horses.

Chorus:

Go check out their stalls, Herakles. The walls are soaked in blood.

Herakles:

Who's the father of this man who boasts to have raised these horses?

Chorus:

Ares. He's the son of Ares. Keeper of the golden shield of Thrace.

499

Herakles:

All you're telling me is that this task, too, is as difficult as all those other tasks that Fate had me perform. My Destiny is harsh and steep.

I've always had to do battle with the sons of Ares. First it was Lykaon, then came Kyknus and now

this! This third one, I see, will have me fighting wild horses as well as their master! Still, let it be known that no one will see me, Herakles, Alkmene's son, cowering before an enemy's hand.
The Palace gates open and Admetus enters. He is dressed in black and his hair is cut short, as a sign of mourning. He is followed by three servants.

Chorus:

Ah, look, Herakles. Here is Admetus, the king himself, coming out of his Palace halls!

Admetus: *To Herakles*

Herakles, son of Zeus, Perseas' blood-child. I wish you joy!

510

Herakles:

Joy to you, too, Admetus, king of Thessaly!

Admetus:

Ah, joy! How I wish I had some of it, Herakles but, I know your heart is in the right place.

Herakles:

Admetus, what is this? You've cut your hair short. Are you in mourning?

Admetus:

Yes, Herakles. I must bury someone today.

Herakles:

May the gods keep such misfortune away from your children!

Admetus:

My children are alive, Herakles. They're inside.

Herakles:

But, Admetus, if it's your father who died, well, he has lived a long life...

Admetus:

No, Herakles, my father is alive and so is my mother.

Herakles:

But then... surely it's not your wife, is it? Not Alcestis?

Admetus:

Ah, Alcestis! Here I can use both words: "yes" and "no!"

520

Herakles:

Are you saying that she has died or that she's still alive?

Admetus:

She exists and she does not! Oh, I am so sick with grief!

Herakles:

Admetus, you're not making sense. I can't understand you.

Admetus:

Surely you know of the Fate she must endure?

Herakles:

I know it. I know that she has offered to die in your stead.

Admetus:

Well then, how can we now say she exists?

Herakles:

Admetus, don't mourn prematurely.

Admetus:

Since she must die, she will die. The dead don't exist.

Herakles:

Think of them as two different things, Admetus. To exist and to be dead are of a different nature.

Admetus:

We think differently on this, Herakles.

530

Herakles:

But who is it you've lost? For whom are you mourning?

Admetus:

I am mourning the loss of a woman. The one we are talking about.

Herakles:

A woman? A friend or a relative?

Admetus:

A friend but one who was a vital part of this household.

Herakles:

And how is it she died here, in your own house?

Admetus:

Her father had died when she was young and we had brought her here, as an orphan.

Herakles:

A terrible thing for you, Admetus. I wish I hadn't come in such an awful hour for you.

He turns to leave but Admetus takes him by the hand

Admetus:

Why do you say that? Where are you going now?

Herakles:

I think I had better leave you in peace and visit another friend of mine.

Admetus:

Good Lord, no, Herakles! That would be dreadful! Stay here!

540

Herakles:

A stranger's visit is a burden to the grief stricken.

Admetus:

The dead are dead, Herakles. Come. Come into the house!

Herakles:

No, Admetus. It's shameful to be feasting in a house of mourning.

Admetus:

We have separate rooms for the guests, Herakles. We'll put you up in one of those.

Herakles:

Let me go, Admetus. I will still be enormously grateful to you for your offer, just the same.

Admetus:

No, Herakles. I can't let you go and stay at someone else's house.

To one of his servants

Take him inside. Take him to the visitors' quarters, at the far end of the palace and organise the others to set up a big table for him.

Herakles follows the servant into the palace.

Admetus speaks to the other servants

Now you go and shut all the other doors so that the visitors may enjoy their meal and not feel sad by hearing all the crying of the mourners.

551

Chorus:

My king, what are you doing? This is madness! Your house has suffered such a great loss yet you let strangers feast in your halls?

Admetus:

Would you have me add to my misfortune? Should I act inhospitably to a friend? Should I have sent him away from my house and from my city? Would that be better? Should I also add to my calamity the ill repute that this house treats strangers as enemies?

Herakles treats me most hospitably whenever I visit his parched land, Argos.

561

Chorus:

But then, why did you hide the true nature of your misfortune, if you say he's such a good friend?

Admetus:

Because if he knew of it he'd never enter my house. Others might think me callous but my house does not know how to insult visitors by sending them away.

Exit Admetus into the palace.

569

Chorus:

This house is truly a welcoming house!

Chorus:

It is the house of a very generous man!

Chorus:

This is the house that Pythian Apollo, god of the delightful lyre, found worthy enough to stay in, to serve in...

Chorus:

...as a kindly shepherd, playing mating songs to its herds...

Chorus:
With his flute...

Chorus:
...on the undulating hills surrounding it.

579

Chorus:
And as Apollo played his enchanting music for Admetus' flocks, the spotted lynxes came out of the Othrys valley to join them...

Chorus:
...and so did a pride of fiery-blond lions...

Chorus:
...and the dappled fawn, moved by the charming music of your lyre, Apollo...

Chorus:
... they had stepped out from behind the fir trees and with their airy feet, rejoiced in a dance.

Chorus:
And that's because Admetus' flocks are countless and his land is spread around the clear waters of Lake Boebia.

591

Chorus:
The boundaries of his paddocks and of all his grazing lands reach out far into the brilliant East, where Apollo, the Sun god, houses his steeds...

Chorus:
...and far, on the other side, it reaches deep into the shadowy West, far beyond the Molossian mountain ranges.

Chorus:
As for his kingdom, it stretches as far as the Aegean promontory of rocky Pelion.

Chorus:
And now, just now, you saw how he opened wide the doors of his house to a visitor...

Chorus:
...even though his eyes were full of tears, grieving the loss of his dear wife who only just now gave out her last breath, here in this house.

601

Chorus:
The noble soul honours respect profusely. All wisdom is owned by the good.

Chorus:
Such a marvellous thing!

Chorus:
And I am certain of this: that the man who respects the gods will enjoy prosperity!

The doors of the palace open slowly and a retinue of mourners emerges.

Among them is Admetus.

The body of Alcestis is carried on a bier, on the shoulders of the servants.

Admetus: *To the Chorus*
Men of Pherae, you have stood by me in my hour of grief.
My servants have prepared my wife's body for its burial pyre and are now carrying it on their shoulders.

Come now and as our custom dictates, farewell the dead woman on her final journey.

Enter Pheres with his slaves from another Palace Gate. He is walking slowly, solemnly, with the help of a walking stick.

His slaves are carrying robes, small ornamental statues and jewellery for the grave.

611

Chorus:
Ah! I can see your father, Admetus. His steps are the steps of an old man. His servants are carrying fine gifts and ornaments for your lady's grave.

Pheres:

I've come out, my son, to share in your pain.

No one can deny, my son that you have lost a most worthy, a most wise wife.

These are unavoidable blows, blows that we must all endure even though they are insufferable.

Take these gifts, my son and let her wear them in the underworld.

620

We must pay our due respect to the corpse of this woman, a woman who has died to save your life a

woman who did not leave me childless and alone in my harsh old age.
Because of this noble deed, her name will be the most famous among all women.

To the corpse of Alcestis

Alcestis! You have saved my son's life and you have put us back onto our feet. Farewell, Alcestis and may your stay in Hades be joyous.

This is the sort of marriage that all mortals should go through. Otherwise let no one be married.

629

Admetus:

Pheres, I have neither invited you to this funeral, nor do I regard you as one of my friends.

Alcestis will not wear any of your gifts –she needs none of it for her burial. She needs nothing of yours. You should have shown your sympathies when I was about to die. Instead, you just stood by, allowing a young person to die instead of you, you, who are an old man. And now you've come to mourn for her?

Neither you nor that woman who claims to have given birth to me can claim to be my true parent. You were never my father and she was never my mother.

640

Was I born by some slave or other and then secretly put to your wife's breast?

You have shown who you really are with this test.

Yes, you've shown us all that I am not a son of yours.

What a champion coward you are Pheres! There's no one more cowardly than you.

Despite the fact that you're old and despite the fact that you've come to the end of your life, you've refused – you did not have the courage- to die in place of your young son! Your only son! Instead, you and your wife made Alcestis, a woman who was not even a blood relative of ours, give her own life.

It is her that I now rightly call, both, my father and mother!

Yet what a wonderful test you could have undertaken! Imagine: to die for your own son! Your life, in any case was at its end.

650

Alcestis and I would be allowed to live out our full life together, without my grieving about my ill fortune.

Look at you! Everything a man would wish for, everything that could make a man happy, came to you! For the best part of your life you were a King!

You had me as son and heir to your kingdom so that you wouldn't die childless or without an heir to look after your fortune and keep it from plundering hands.

And can you say that you've let me go to my own death because I've been disrespectful to you and your old age?

660

No you can't because more than anything else, I have shown you total respect.

But look at how I'm repaid by you for my kindness! Look how I'm repaid by my own father and by her who claims to be my own mother!

You better hurry up, then, old man. Time is running out for you. Hurry up and have another child to take care of you in your old age. A child who'll get you prepared for your burial, a child to roll the shroud over you, bury you in your grave – because it won't be me. It won't be my hands who'll be doing the burying of your corpse! Never! So far as you're concerned, old man, I am dead!

If I am alive because someone else has saved my life and if today I can see the light of the sun, it is to that someone else that I belong. It is that someone else who is my true parent and it is that someone else for whom I'll care in his old age.

670

Old men! They moan and groan about old age and they pray for death to come.

They lie! Their prayers are lies! Lies because the moment they see death approaching them, suddenly they have no problem with their old age and with their lengthy life! Suddenly none of them want to die! They moan and groan no more!

Chorus:

Stop, Admetus, stop! You have enough grief to endure already! Don't make it any worse for you by hurting your father's feelings!

Pheres:

My son, do I look like one of those Lydian or Trojan slaves of yours that you've gone and bought with money? Is that why you insult me like this? You know full well that I am a Thessalian, a man who is born free and who is the legitimate son of a Thessalian man. You throw your childish and brash insults at me far too readily, my son and I'm not going to let you get away with it so easily.

It is true, you are my son and, as such, I have brought you up to be the master of this house but I do not

owe you my life. There is no such law handed to us by our ancestors. No law that says that fathers must die for their sons; nor is it a law among the rest of the Greeks. Your life is yours and yours only and it is yours whether it is a fortunate one or one bereft of fortune.

680

You have received from me all that you may justly ask for. You are now the ruler of many people and, as well, I will leave you much land –all the land that was left to me by my father so, what is it that you think I owe you? How have I wronged you? What have I taken away from you? Life? No! I won't ask you to die on my behalf and you should not ask me to die on yours.

691

You love the light of the day. Do you think your old father doesn't?

I have no doubt at all that life in the underworld will be very long and that life here is very short. Short, yes, but sweet, nevertheless! Sweet, indeed and that's why you fought without the slightest bit of shame, to stay alive long past your fated hour.

You have avoided death because you have killed her! And you have the audacity to say that I have no courage? No, you're the coward, here! You're the one who lacks courage! You're the one who is beaten in courage by a woman! A wife, who died to save her husband! And what a husband, ey? Such a... such a fine young, brave husband!

699

What a clever man you are, my son! Clever enough to have found the secret of immortality! Now all you have to do is to keep exchanging your life for the life of a wife. Every new wife gets persuaded to give her life for you. Brave stuff, my son! And then you dare call your own parents cowards, for refusing to do this!

The evil in you, my son, is astounding!

Admetus tries to speak but Pheres stops him

Silence! Not another word from you!

Know this much, Admetus: Every man loves his life as much as you do!

And if you dare continue with these insufferable insults then you're going to receive some insufferable insults yourself –and they will all be true!

Chorus: *To Pheres*

Too much blame and rebuke has already been cast.

Chorus:

Let it stop now.

Chorus:

Come, old man, stop insulting your son!

Admetus: To Pheres

Go on! Insult me all you want! I shall disprove everything you say. If the truth hurts your ears then stop behaving so badly!

710

Pheres:

I would be behaving worse if I had died for your sake!

Admetus:

Worse? Is the death of a young man the same as that of an old one?

Pheres:

Our living must be done within a single lifetime, not two!

Admetus:

Well then, I hope yours goes on for longer than that of Zeus himself!

Pheres:

You dare curse your father even though he's done you no wrong?

Admetus:

Yes, I curse you because I can see your unfathomable lust for a long life.

Pheres:

Me? Is it me who is burying this corpse here, in my stead?

Admetus:

This burial is proof of your despicable cowardice!

Pheres:

But you cannot not say that this woman has died because of me!

Admetus:

Gods! How I hope you come asking for my help one day!

720

Pheres:

And you! You, go on courting women! The more of them you marry the more you'll have to die for you!

Admetus:

The shame falls upon you! They die because you did not want to die yourself!

Pheres: *Admires the sun light*

This light! Apollo's light is splendid! Splendid, indeed!

Admetus:

Your spirit is that of a coward and not of a true man. It is a shameful spirit.

Pheres:

It's certainly not the spirit of some old fool you can trick into carrying off to the grave!

Admetus:

But when you do die, you will die a discredited man.

Pheres:

I care little for what people say about me, once I'm dead.

Admetus:

Appalling! Old age makes such cowards out of people! Takes away their courage!

Pheres: *Indicating Alcestis*

Courage? Well, you've certainly found courage in that one there. What you didn't find is wits!

Admetus:

Leave! Leave now and let me bury her corpse.

730

Pheres:

I shall leave but you should be burying her as a murderer buries his victim and, like all murderers you shall pay the price to her family. Her brother Acastus will not be able to call himself a man if he won't extract justice from you for spilling his sister's blood!

Admetus:

Go now! Go on to that woman who lives with you!

Go and live your childless lives. Childless though your son is still alive!

That's the sort of Fate you two deserve! Go ahead and live your old lives to the full.

You'll never set foot beneath the same roof as me.

Had I been able to denounce my house with heralds and town criers, I would have done so.

To the mourners

Come, friends, let us go! This is the dreadful misfortune we must attend to now. Let us carry this body to the pyre. Come!

The entourage obeys and, carrying Alcestis' body, they exit.

740

Chorus: *To Alcestis as she's taken away.*

O, Alcestis! O poor, brave, noble woman! Most admirable soul!

Farewell!

Chorus:

May Hermes of the Underworld and Hades welcome you kindly and if virtue receives any rewards down there, may you share in them

Chorus:

May you sit by the throne of Persephone, Hades' consort and serve her as her attendant.

Chorus follows the entourage

Short pause before a male servant appears through the palace gate.

Servant:

O, Lord! I have met many visitors to Admetus' palace and I have taken good care of them all. Visitors from all over the world. I have spread a full good table for them; but this one! This last visitor was like none of the others. I have never come across anyone like him. Not one of them was worse than him!

750

First of all, he saw that the master is grieving but he still went right in, right through the threshold of the house! No manners at all! Then, second of all, there we were, totally in the grips of our misfortune, serving him as best as we could but no, that wasn't good enough for him. Instead of accepting with grace whatever we served him, he'd go on demanding for more. Whatever his heart desired, if it wasn't on the table, he'd shout for it!

Then, third of all, he takes a huge cup, one of those made from ivy wood, fills it up to the very top with undiluted wine -that stuff that's made from the fruit of the vine- and drinks it all up! Well, that sent the fire of the wine off to flood his skull completely! After that, he... makes garlands out of myrtle and he goes and crowns himself with them.!

760

Then, (counts in his fingers) fifth of all, he begins howling drunken songs, loud and way out of tune! Two tunes, really, all jumbled up together.

There he was, singing away at the top of his voice, not caring a bit about Admetus' misfortune while we were all mourning the death of our mistress.

Still, we tried not to show our tears to him because that's what Admetus had demanded of us.

So, there I was, making a feast for a stranger, a thief, I reckon, or a crook of some sort, when the mistress left without my giving her my last farewell, without being able to mourn the woman that was like a mother to me –to me and to the rest of the servants.

Just like the mother Alcestis was to us.

770

Protected us from a million tragedies by softening the blows of her husband's anger.

So, would you blame me if I hated this stranger who has suddenly descended upon us in the middle of all our troubles?

Enter Herakles from the same door of the palace, drunk, wearing a garland on his head and wielding a large cup. He notices the servant and walks towards to him.

Herakles:

Oi, you there! What's with the frowny face? What are you so... solemn about? Not a proper look to greet your visitors with. You've got have a happy face, laugh a bit, when you're taking care of u strangers. Look at you! Here you are, you have before you one of your master's best friends and what do you do? You greet him with frowns and misery! Not a chuckle to be seen or heard anywhere!

You're mourning the death of a stranger! So?

Here! Come here and let me teach you a thing or two. Let me make you a bit wiser.

Tell me, do you know what the real situation is with the mortals?

No, of course you don't. How would you?

780

Well, come, come here! Listen to me and I'll tell you.

Waving his hand across the audience

The situation of all mortals –every one of them, every single one of them- is the same: They'll all die! They must! And none of them know if they'll still be around tomorrow. Fate's feet walk on uncharted paths. No one can tell us where they're walking. No philosopher can make it clear for us.

Take this lesson from me, my friend: Enjoy life! Drink and call each day your own. The rest is Fate's business.

790

Oh, and don't forget Aphrodite. The sweetest god of them all! The sweetest and the kindest. Forget about all this sad stuff and do as I say, boy! You know I'm right, don't you? Sure you do!

Listen! Forget all this excessive grief! Go and put a garland on your head and raise a glass with me.

Forget this horrible disaster that happened here.

Take a drink boy, because a drink, splashing about in a full cup, will navigate those gathered brows of yours and those dark shadows on your face into a safe harbour.

Mortals like us ought to be thinking of mortal things.

800

Indicating the audience again

If I'm any judge at all of such things, I reckon that those men whose faces are always full of worry aren't living a life, they're living a disaster.

Servant:

I know all that but this is not the right time for parties and laughter.

Herakles:

The dead person is a stranger. The masters of the house are still living. Why drag yourself into such sorrow?

Servant:

Living? What do you mean living? Don't you know what disaster has visited this place?

Herakles:

Sure I do... unless your master has been lying to me.

Servant:

My master is a very kind host. Too kind!

810

Herakles:

A stranger has died! Should that stop me from being happy?

Servant:

The dead person is not a stranger. She is very, very close to the family.

Herakles:

Has Admetus kept this misfortune from me?

Servant:

Go, now Herakles! Go and leave us to our sorrows.

Herakles:

Ah, now, these are words that truly reveal the loss of someone close and not that of a stranger!

Servant:

Had it been a stranger, your feasting wouldn't worry me in the slightest.

Herakles:

Has my host treated me improperly?

Servant:

You've come to us at an improper time. We are grieving. You can see our black clothes and our cut hair.

820

Herakles:

But who died? Was it one of his children? Or was it his old father?

Servant:

No, his wife died. It is Admetus' wife.

Herakles:

What? His wife? And still he let me stay and be entertained?

Servant:

He was too ashamed to send you away from his house.

Herakles:

O, the poor man! He lost a wife!

Servant:

And we are lost along with her!

Herakles:

I thought as much when I saw his teary eyes, his short hair and his sad face but he told me that he was taking the corpse of a foreigner to the grave and I believed him. That's why I was reluctant to go through that gate. I didn't want to go inside. I didn't want to feast in the house of a kind host who had suffered such a loss.

830

And here I am, drinking and eating and putting garlands on my head!

He tears the garland off his head and throws it and the cup on the ground, angry at himself.

But it's your fault! You should have told me the house is in such a terrible state.

Tell me, where is the grave? Where can I find Admetus?

Servant:

Not far from the city. On the side of the road that takes you to Larissa. You'll see an engraved tomb stone.

Exit servant into the palace

Short pause while Herakles becomes reflective

Herakles:

Dear heart of mine! And you, too, my right hand! Both of you have experienced many tests! Come now, Herakles, show me what sort of a son you made for your mother, Alcmene, daughter of Electrion, from Tirynth and for your father, the great Zeus himself!

840

Now I must repay Admetus my debt for his generous hospitality! I must bring back to him, to this palace, his dead wife, Alcestis.

I shall go to her grave and wait for Thanatos, the black-caped chief of the dead. I am sure I'll find him there, by the tomb, feasting on the blood of the sacrificial offerings. I'll jump on him from behind and grab him tightly with my two arms. Hold him here, within the tight grip of these arms. I have a grip so tight that no one can tear him out of it without crushing his ribs. And there I'll hold him until he brings me back Alcestis.

850

But if this fails, if he doesn't turn up to feast on the blood of the offerings, I'll go down to the sunless palaces of Persephone and her Master, Pluto and I'll ask them to hand me over the woman. I'm certain they'll agree and I'll bring her back up here, into Admetus' arms.

He is such a good friend that man! Poor man, though he was struck by such a terrible misfortune, out of

respect he said nothing to me and, instead of sending me away, he received me as his guest. What other man in the whole of Thessaly -the whole of Greece!- is so hospitable? No one! Let him not then say that his act of generosity went to someone unworthy of it.

Exit Herakles.

A short pause before Admetus enters solemnly followed by his entourage of servants, children and the chorus. They are returning from the funeral of Alcestis.

860

Admetus:

O, what misery! How dismal the road that leads to this widowed house, this house of bitter melancholy!

O, what misery! What sorrow! O, the grief!

Where can I go now? Where can I stay now? What words can I now utter and what words must I hold unsaid?

How can I die?

What cursed Fate gave birth to me?

O, how I envy the dead! I can't wait to be among them, to live in their halls!

This light, the light of the sun gives me no joy!

Walking upon this earth gives me no joy!

O, what a dear hostage Death has dragged away from me and has surrendered to Hades!

872

Chorus:

Walk on, walk on, Admetus! Enter your house.

Admetus:

I can't take it!

Chorus:

Yes, Admetus, your grief calls for many tears.

Admetus:

Ah, the grief, the grief!

Chorus:

I know the depth of that grief, Admetus.

Admetus:

Let me die!

Chorus:

That will not help your dead wife, Admetus.

Admetus:

Alcestis!

Chorus:

It is a bitter thing to have lost the face of your beloved wife for ever.

878

Admetus:

O, you've dug into the deepest wound of my heart with those words.

Is there a worse thing for a man to suffer than to lose his one and only, his faithful wife? I should have never married! I should have never lived with her in the same house.

I envy the unmarried. I envy the childless. They have only one life to think about and the troubles that come with it are only small. To pain of seeing the children getting ill or the wife being torn from your marriage bed and sent to Hades, is impossible to endure. So why endure it? Why endure such pain, if you can live without marriages and children?

Chorus:

Dreadful disaster! Too dreadful to fight against.

Admetus:

O, Gods!

890

Chorus:

Such an awful agony, Admetus, I know, but try to cope with it.

Admetus:

No, I can't cope!

Chorus:

Yes, I know Admetus, it's a heavy disaster. Still...

Admetus:

I cannot cope!

Chorus:

Yes, you can, Admetus. You're not the first man to suffer the loss...

Admetus:

Ah!

Chorus:

...of his wife. Misfortunes of all sorts can fall upon all of us mortals, men and women the same.

Admetus:

O, such a deep, unbearable pain to have your loved one taken down to the underworld.

To Chorus

Why did you stop me? Why did you hold me back from throwing myself into the grave? I wanted to lie beside her, beside this woman that has no equal! I wanted to lie there, with her, beneath the soil. Hades would then have taken with him, to the other side of the lake, two souls instead of one. Two faithful souls.

903

Chorus:

Admetus, once I had a relative whose house was emptied by the loss of his one and only son. Now, that's a sorrow worthy of a thousand tears of grief but still, that man survived that sorrow. And even though he was left childless and without an heir, just an old man with grey hair, nearing the end of his life, still, he endured and survived that enormous sorrow.

911

Admetus:

Look at my house! How could I possibly enter it? How could I possibly live within its walls now, now that my Fate has changed so much? So much!

How dreadfully my Fate has changed!

I remember... I remember the day when I entered this palace, holding the hand of my beloved!

Lighted torches from the pine trees of Mount Pelion, beautiful wedding songs and a huge, noisy wedding procession accompanied us. Blessing were showered upon my dear dead wife and upon me, both of us, the offspring of great houses, becoming one in marriage.

921

But now!

Now, the songs of joy have become a heavy dirge and the white cloaks have turned black!

This now is the sad procession that leads me to these desolate chambers!

Chorus:

This misfortune, Admetus, caught you in the middle of a happy life, a life that had experienced no suffering.

Chorus:

Still, you have saved your life and soul, Admetus. Think of that. You have lost your wife and her love, that is true but you're not the only man who have suffered such a loss.

Chorus:

Death has separated many men from their wives.

Admetus:

My friends, though others might think the opposite, I believe that my wife's Fate was better than mine. Not only will she now be free of pain but she has escaped much anguish, with glory!

I, on the other hand, I, whose lot was to die, will now go on living a life of misery. I certainly know that now.

I don't have the courage to enter this palace any more. Whom will I greet with joy when I enter it and who will greet me with joy in return?

Where do I turn?

The emptiness in that house will send me away. The moment I see the bed my wife slept in, the chair she sat in, both empty, the moment I see the floors unswept, the children grabbing at my knees, crying for their mother, the moment I see the servants mourning the loss of such a great mistress, all this will send me away!

And then, while all this is going on inside the house, outside it, the people will go on having weddings and the women will go on gathering together, all things that will be driving back indoors!

How could I even look at women my wife's age again?

And then, all my enemies will point their finger at me and say, "look there! Look at this shameful man. He lives on because he is a coward! He didn't have the courage to die when his Fate dictated he should but he escaped his death by making his wife die in his place. Can we call him a man? And he also hates his parents because they wouldn't die for him!"

That's the sort of gossip I'll have to add on top of my misery!

960

So, my friends, I ask you all, what's the point of going on living when such awful words and awful deeds are told about you?

Admetus, now a broken man, pulls his cloak over his head and withdraws to the side of the palace door.

Chorus:

I have walked where the muses walk and studied the highest of all the countless minds, yet I have found nothing in the world more powerful than Fate. Fate is unconquerable, unbeatable!

970

Chorus:

Not even Orpheus' enchanting voice, the voice that's engraved in the Thracian wooden slates...

Chorus:

...nor all the magic herbs that Apollo has given to the generations of the Asclepian physicians...

Chorus 3:

...not even they can cure the multitude of pains suffered by the poor mortals.

Chorus 4:

Merciless Fate! You are the only goddess who has neither shrine nor statue where I can go and pray or give sacrifice. You are the only goddess who rejects all pleas.

Chorus 1:

Most revered goddess! Don't enter into my life now more heavily than you ever did before! Whatever Zeus decides he will accomplish with your help.

980

Chorus:

And with your strength, Fate, you can tame even the iron of the Chalybes, its inventors.

Chorus:

Pitiless and shameless might is behind your every will.

Chorus:

And so, Admetus, you, too, are chained in this goddess' mighty arms.

But courage! Tears won't raise the dead and even the sons of gods vanish into the shadowy halls of Hades below.

991

Chorus:

Alcestis was loved when she was here, amongst us and she will be loved still, while she's dead.

Chorus:

You had brought to your house the most virtuous of all women, Admetus.

Chorus:

Don't let your wife's tomb stand merely as a monument of a dead person but let it be a shrine for the traveller, a shrine on the roadside like those people build for gods.

1000

Chorus:

And so, when that traveller goes past that shrine, he will say, "This woman, this woman buried here, had once given her own life for the sake of her husband so now she is a blessed divinity..."

Chorus:

...and then he would address her with these words, "greetings, revered goddess, I pray for your blessing."

Enter Herakles leading a woman whose face is fully hidden behind a veil.

Chorus:

Look, Admetus, I see Alcmene's son, Herakles coming to your house.

Herakles: *Reproaching Admetus*

Admetus! Friends should speak openly to each other and not hold their pain deep inside their soul.

1010

I thought I was worthy enough of your friendship, enough to be able to stand by you during your misfortune and to be able to give you proof of my deep affection for you. But you, instead of telling me about your wife's death, you allowed me to feast in your house, as if the death was that of a foreigner. So there I was, inside a house full of sorrow, with garlands around my head and pouring libations to the gods!

I'm angry at you about that, Admetus; angry, yes but never mind, I don't want to add to your sadness now. But let me tell why I've come back.

1020

See this woman, here? Look after her for me until I return, Admetus.

I need to go and kill the king of the Bistonians and return with the Thracian horses. But if somehow, I get killed in the process –may the gods forbid that because I do want to return- then, please keep her for yourself. I give her to you! Keep her as one of the servants in your house. I... I've worked very hard to win her.

You see, I came across a public contest that some people had set up, a contest really worthy of real athletes and so I joined it... She was the winner's prize.

1030

The prizes awarded for the light games were horses but for the harder games like boxing and wrestling there was cattle... with a woman thrown in!

Well, I thought, since Fate had brought me there, to that spot, it would be a pity not to take part in the games and to miss out on such a good prize and such a big glory.

So, like I said, take her. I didn't steal her from anyone, I've earned her with hard work! I'm sure that one day you'll thank me for her.

Admetus:

Herakles, I didn't reveal my wife's awful Fate to you, not because I had any ill feelings towards you or because I thought of you as unworthy but because by allowing you to go and stay at another man's house, I'd be adding sorrow upon sorrow to my life.

1041

My grief over the loss of my wife was bad enough.

As for this woman, Herakles, my lord, I beg you, if there's any way at all, find some other Thessalian man to take care of her. Someone who is not suffering in the same way as I am. You have many friends here in Pherae. Don't leave me with a reminder of my terrible loss. I'd never be able to control my tears, watching her go about our house.

Don't add another torment upon the one I already have, a torment which is unbearable enough as it is. And then, where will she sleep? From her fine clothes and her jewellery, it appears she's a young woman, so in what part of the house will she live?

1050

In the men's quarters? Would she stay a virgin for you, among all these men? No, it's not easy to hold back youth, Herakles. So you see, I'm also thinking about what's best for you; or should I put her up in the bedroom of my dead wife? How could I let her sleep in her bed? There will be an outcry of condemnation from her, as well as from the people who'll be saying that I've betrayed the woman who saved my life by lying in the bed of another woman.

1060

I owe Alcestis my respect and I must think of that always.

Addressing the woman

And you, young lady, you look very much like my Alcestis, both, in body and in demeanour.

In tears, he begs Herakles

O, gods! Herakles, please take this woman away! Take her far from my eyes, Herakles! Have pity on me!

When I look at her, I see my own wife! My heart is torn apart and the fountains of my eyes burst open! O, unfortunate Admetus! You are now beginning to taste the bitterness of your sorrow!

1070

Chorus:

I agree, Admetus, your luck is bad, indeed. Nevertheless, we must endure whatever the gods give us.

Herakles:

If only I had the strength to take your wife from the dark halls of Hades, Admetus! Take her and bring her back up here, in the Sun's light! I would have loved to be able to do that for you.

Admetus:

I know, Herakles. I know you'd love to do that for me but how? The dead can never return.

Herakles:

Well then, Admetus. Don't make your suffering any worse than it is. Have courage!

Admetus:

It's easy to give advice about suffering, Herakles. It's much harder to endure it.

Herakles:

But do you want to go on sighing for ever? What's the good of that?

1080

Admetus:

I know that, Herakles but my love for her brings out these sighs.

Herakles:

The love for the dead is a full of tears.

Admetus:

I am lost! More lost than I can put into words.

Herakles:

No one can deny it, Admetus: you have lost a rare woman.

Admetus:

Such a loss that this man will see no more joy in life.

Herakles:

Time will soften the blow. The pain is still fresh.

Admetus:

Time, you say? If by time you mean the time after I die!

Herakles:

Another woman and new marriages will put an end to your suffering.

Admetus:

Stop it, Herakles! What are you saying? I could never think of such a thing!

Herakles:

What? Will you not marry? Will you stay in a widowed bed for ever?

1090

Admetus:

No other woman will lie next to me.

Herakles:

Do you think your dead wife will gain anything by that?

Admetus:

I owe her my respect, wherever she is.

Herakles:

I admire you for it, I do but it's still a foolish thing you're doing.

Admetus:

That may be so but you'll never see this man in a new marriage.

Herakles:

Such loyalty! Praiseworthy, indeed!

Admetus:

May I die if ever I betray my dead Alcestis!

Herakles takes the woman's hand and offers to join it with that of Admetus.

Herakles:

Come, now! Receive this woman into your palace.

Admetus:

No, Herakles! Don't! I beg you, in the name of your father, Zeus!

Herakles:

Admetus, if you don't accept her, you will be doing the wrong thing.

1100

Admetus:

Yet if I do accept her, I shall be shattering my heart with sadness!

Herakles:

Come, Admetus. Do as I say! Perhaps this will give you the joy you need right now!

Admetus:

O, how I wish you had never won her in those games!

Herakles:

Still, Admetus, my win is also your win!

Admetus:

True but tell the woman to leave us.

Herakles:

I will, if she must but first carefully consider the word "must."

Admetus:

She must, yes, unless you're going to get angry at me.

Herakles:

I insist, Admetus and if I insist, it means I know something you don't.

Admetus:

Well then, you win but let me assure you this deed of yours does not please me at all!

Herakles:

Yet the time will come when you will thank me for it. Now do as I say!

1110

Admetus: *To the servants*

Go ahead, take her inside, since we... must!

Herakles:

No, I wouldn't leave it to the servants to do that.

Admetus:

Well, then you do it yourself... if you must!

Herakles:

No, I must put her only into your very own hands.

Admetus:

No, not me. I won't be touching her. She's free to enter, if she... must.

Herakles:

I only have faith in your right hand.

Admetus:

My lord, Herakles, you are forcing me to do something I do not wish to do!

Herakles:

Come, come! Be brave now. Stretch out your right hand and touch hers with it!

Admetus turns his head away as he stretches his hand

Admetus:

There! I am stretching out my right hand.

The woman stretches out her own hand until it touches that of Admetus.

Herakles: *Laughing*

You're behaving like you're about to cut Medussa's head.

Have you got her?

Admetus:

Yes, I've got her.

1119

Herakles:

Good, then look after her and one day you'll say that the son of Zeus is a true friend of yours.

Herakles suddenly pulls the veil back, to reveal the woman's face. It is Alcestis.

Take a good look at her, Admetus. See if she looks at all like your wife!

Admetus shakes his head

Come now, Admetus! Leave sorrow behind and enjoy your good luck!

Admetus: *Turns and is shocked at the sight of his wife*

O, gods! O, gods, what can I say? A wonder beyond one's wishes!

Do I really see my Alcestis or is this some delusional joy that some god has sent to befuddle my wits?

Herakles:

No, no, Admetus. No delusional joy. The woman you see is truly your wife!

Admetus:

Look... perhaps she's some ghost from Hades...

Herakles:

No, Admetus, I, your guest, am not one of those people who resurrect souls.

Admetus:

But... this is the very woman I have buried!

1130

Herakles:

Very true and that's why I can understand why it is so difficult for you to believe your good luck!

Admetus:

Can I... touch her? Speak with her as if she were alive?

Herakles:

Go ahead, speak with her. Your wish has been granted in full.

Admetus: *Embracing Alcestis*

O, eyes and body of my beloved wife! Holding you was beyond my wildest hopes. I never believed I would ever see you again.

Herakles:

She is yours, Admetus. And I hope the gods keep their curses away from you.

Admetus: *To Herakles*

Brave son of the mighty god Zeus! I hope you enjoy every happiness and that your father protects you from every evil. Because you, Herakles, you, alone, have raised my house up again.

But tell me, how did you bring her back up into the sunlight?

1140

Herakles:

I fought with her master. Thanatos himself.

Admetus:

But where did you find him? Where did you fight him?

Herakles:

I ambushed him. Hid myself near the tomb and when he arrived, I jumped on him!

Admetus:

Why isn't she talking?

Herakles:

You mustn't hear her voice yet. Not until the sun raises for the third time. She has been promised to the gods of the underworld so she must be purified from that promise.

Now take her into your home Admetus and, as always, remain honest and pious with all your guests!

And now, my friends, farewell! I must now go and perform a task for the son of my lord Sthenalos.

1151

Admetus:

Stay, Herakles. Stay with us. Share our house.

Herakles:

Another time, Admetus. I must rush now.

Admetus:

Good luck then, Herakles and I hope you choose our path again soon.

To the chorus

I give this command to all my people in all the four precincts that make up my kingdom:

Let there be dancing to celebrate the happy reversal of this misfortune and let all the altars be covered by the clouds of smoke from the burning of the sacrificed bulls.

A new, better life is now beginning for us and, I must admit, I am delighted.

Admetus and Alcestis exit into the palace

Chorus:

The deeds of the gods appear in many forms...

Chorus:

And gods often perform deeds even beyond our hopes.

1160

Chorus:

Our wishes may not be granted but the gods will find ways of achieving what we never thought achievable.

Chorus:

Such was the path of our story.

Exit all
**The End of
Euripides'
Alcestis**