

ALCESTIS' CHILDREN AND THE CHARACTER OF ADMETUS

I

By comparison with Aeschylus and Sophocles, Euripides makes remarkable use of young children in his tragedies.¹ There are vocal parts, sung by individual children in *Alcestis* and *Andromache*, cries off for the two boys in *Medea*, and a song for a supplementary chorus of boys in *Supplikes*. Important episodes concern silent children on stage in *Heracles* and *Troades*, lesser roles occur in *Hecuba* and *Iphigeneia in Aulis*, and suppliant children may be on stage throughout *Heracleidae*. No children figure in the extant plays of Aeschylus, and Sophocles gives them silent parts only in *Ajax* and *Oedipus Tyrannus*. It seems reasonable to suppose that children are proportionally more central to Euripides' idea of tragedy, and that individual plays might be studied from this angle. Accordingly I propose to analyse the part of the children in *Alcestis*, not with questions of methods of performance in mind, but for what the presence, action, utterance or absence of children at any point can tell us about the issues and themes of the play.

I shall concentrate on three main questions. First, what is gained by having Alcestis die not simply as a wife but as a mother? Second, what is gained by having one of the children sing? Third, why are the children absent from the end of the play? A certain amount of repetition of the obvious and of material already satisfactorily treated by others cannot be avoided, but may I hope be excused by the requirements of the approach if this throws light on what is a very problematic play. Further, the children's role needs to be seen in the frame of a general view of the play which it will reinforce but which cannot here be justified at every step. I shall take more or less for granted a view of which the main points are as follows: Alcestis loves Admetus and is wholly admirable; Admetus loves Alcestis, his grief is genuine and his hospitality wholly admirable; the poet is concerned with how Admetus suffers and not with his state of mind at the time when his wife promised to die for him, so that there is no implication of cowardice; the meaning of the play lies in the way in which the life which she dies to save turns out to be worthless without her, that is, in general terms, it lies in an ironical appreciation of the value of the limitations imposed on human life by mortality. Within this framework I wish to argue for only one important modification, which is indeed relevant to the general question of how character may be conceived in Greek tragedy. Critics who see Admetus as cowardly or superficial make great use of the confrontation with Pheres where he cuts a poor figure. Although they are in my opinion wrong about Admetus, nevertheless they are able to see him as one and the same person throughout the play; his behaviour in general lends itself to interpretation in the unflattering light of Pheres' claim that he betrayed his wife. Defenders of Admetus, however, have not satisfactorily explained how the scene contributes to an audience's perception of a broadly consistent personality, and hence, although their view of Admetus' probity is correct, it seems to entail a fragmentation of the stage figure such that the action of the scene is not felt as deriving from an individual consistently realized throughout the play. Admetus, then—what else?—will be one of those figures whose presentation is evidence of the otherness of Euripidean tragedy, in which the stylisation of dramatic existence may subordinate unity of character to impersonal modes of exposition or to rhetorical exploration of intriguing facets of the action. This may be the case; yet the disruption would be extraordinarily severe, since Admetus, by his obstinate loyalty to Alcestis and his instinct for hospitality, does have a decisive contribution to make to his own miraculous salvation. If therefore there is a reading which accommodates the strikingly rhetorical concept of dramatic interaction of the scene with Pheres to the centrality of Admetus' character, broadly conceived, which the action as a whole

¹ For a general survey see G. M. Sifakis, 'Children in Greek tragedy', *BICS* xxvi (1979) 67–80.

seems to invite us to recognize, then it should be preferred to one which tolerates inconsistency as an instance of an alien dramatic idiom. Thus I think that aspects of the scene need to be reconsidered and taken in conjunction with the question of the absence of the children at the end of the play.²

II

The first question concerns the advantages of representing Alcestis as a mother as well as a wife. It is by no means inevitable that this should be so, but it is clear that her position is much more complex than it would have been if she had only herself and her husband to consider. We should try to define precisely how this complexity contributes to the action. Further, it is by no means inevitable that Alcestis should be shown with her children. In *Hippolytus* Phaedra has children (421), but they are not part of the action. The prominence of Alcestis' children is something to be examined carefully.

Before Alcestis appears on the stage we learn of what she did inside the house when she understood that this was the day on which she had to die (152–96). The information which the Servant here gives about Alcestis is the necessary foundation for her actual appearance, for it covers ground which the later scene takes for granted and does not explore.³ The structure of the speech is striking in that the narrative contrasts the private world of the house with the public world outside: 'All the city knows that she is the best of wives, but you will wonder at what she did inside the house' (156–7). But this contrast is itself extended, for the narrative moves from Alcestis' prayers at the altars of the house (162–71), to the innermost privacy of her bedroom (175–88), and finally to the farewells addressed to the other members of the household, the children and the servants (189–95). The effect of this structure is to mark the bedroom as the central sanctum, and it is reinforced by her outbreak of tears, hitherto controlled, and her unwillingness to tear herself away. This combination guarantees the expression of feelings at the furthest remove from the public sphere, which the audience will have no chance to experience later but which, once reported, should not be forgotten. And here her thoughts are for her husband and the marriage bed which symbolises their union.⁴ It is for this that she dies (180–1).

But before she reaches the bedroom she visits the altars and prays to Hestia for her children's future: 'Lady, I am dying, and my last request to you is to look after my orphaned children and bring them happy marriages' (163–9). These, her first reported words, mark her as a mother whose chief care is for her children. And when she leaves the bedroom she holds the weeping

² The approach here adopted is in general aligned with the interpretations of A. M. Dale, *Euripides, Alcestis* (Oxford 1954) xxii–xxix and A. Lesky, 'Der angeklagte Admet', *Maske und Kothurn* x (1964) 203–16, here cited as reprinted in *Gesammelte Schriften* (Bern/München 1956) 281–94. See also W. Steidle, *Studien zum antiken Drama* (München 1968) 132–52; H. Rohdich, *Die Euripideische Tragödie* (Heidelberg 1968) 23–43; A. P. Burnett, *Catastrophe survived* (Oxford 1971) 22–46; A. Rivier, 'En marge d'Alceste', i, *MH* xxix (1972) 122–40, ii, *MH* xxx (1973) 130–43; M. Lloyd, *G&R* xxxii (1985) 119–31; L. Bergson, *Eranos* lxxxiii (1985) 7–22. Of course there is wide divergence of views among these writers, but they agree in taking a positive view of Alcestis and Admetus. Since I believe this view to be substantially correct, I confine my notes mainly to points of agreement or disagreement with these writers, and only occasionally refer to others who in various ways take a negative view on these particular matters.

For discussion of limitations on coherent dramatic personality (although without reference to the Pheres scene), see J. Gould, *PCPS* xxiv (1978) 43–67. D. J. Conacher, *AJPh* cii (1981) 3–25, argues (correctly, in my view) for greater relevance to characterization in rhetorically shaped scenes than Gould would allow, although I do not accept his negative treatment of Admetus in the Pheres scene.

³ See Dale (n. 2) xxvi–xxvii and Lesky (n. 2) 285–6 for the relation between the two scenes.

⁴ It is futile to try and distinguish her devotion to her marriage bed from love for her husband. What she feels for him is not undifferentiated emotion, but is conceptualised in accordance with the way in which she sees herself and her station; there is no hint of any divergence of feeling, and she thinks of her daughter's future similarly (166, 316).

children in her arms and then moves back into the wider world of the household, shaking hands with all the weeping servants (189–95).⁵

Alcestis is given the aspirations and expectations typically ascribed to women within the limits permitted by Athenian society. What she has to lose for her love is a life full of the most precious things life could possibly hold for her, as a comparison with other self-sacrificing women in Euripides shows. Polyxena steels herself to die 'no bride, but deprived of the marriage which was my due' (*Hec.* 416). Macaria in *Heracleidae* gives up her 'marriage prime' for her younger brothers and sisters, and asks for a proper burial as 'the treasure taken in exchange for children and maidenhood' (591–2); in any case no-one would want 'to take me as wife and beget children from me' (523–4). Iphigeneia will give her life for Greece; the destruction of Troy 'will be my lasting memorial and will be my children and marriage and renown' (*I.A.* 1398–9). It is clear that what makes life most worth living for these girls, and most sad in losing, is the prospect of due marriage and motherhood.

Alcestis already has what these girls can never have, and this is what she gives up. And this suggests that the right way to see her position is that she dies heroically to save her husband, so completing her commitment to her marriage to the utmost degree, but that this sacrifice can only be carried through at the cost of abandoning what she most prizes. Only after her love for Admetus is indelibly stamped on our awareness by the Servant's speech will Euripides go on to develop the care for the children already established in the lines which flank the crucial bedroom episode. This, then, is at least one of the reasons why Alcestis is represented as a mother as well as a wife. If she had had no children, or if they had merely been mentioned, her choice of death would be untrammelled; because she has children, who along with marriage form the centre of feminine aspirations, her choice is complicated by her feelings for them and her dilemma becomes tragic. In meeting the ultimate demands of wifedom she must set aside those of motherhood.

The structure of the Servant's speech shows that it would be wrong to say that Alcestis dies for the whole family or for the children.⁶ It may be true, given that the children must lose one or the other, that they would be better off with their father alive than with their mother, although Alcestis later tells us that she could have kept them and married as she wished (285–8). But this question is never raised and the clear emphasis is that she dies for him, but wants to ensure their future in the circumstances. Nor is any hold given here for the idea that Alcestis made her promise as a bride but that in the subsequent years motherhood changed her attitude to a pact which she must still go through with, for it is clear from lines 287–8 that she already had her children when she made her choice.⁷ In a strange way which throws light on two plays very different from each other, her predicament is not unlike that of Medea. Medea too is totally committed to a marriage which is an apparently insoluble unit of husband and children. When

⁵ Admittedly it is not stated explicitly that she has left the bedroom before she embraces the children, and as fruit of the union they are certainly relevant to her feelings towards her marriage bed. Yet they are not mentioned in her address, and the sequence κατ' Ἀδμήτου δόμους (170), ἐσπεσοῦσα (175), ἐξιοῦσα' (188), κατὰ στέγας (192) separates them from the bed as much as from the household at large. Thus Rivier (n. 2) i 134, although correctly reading the scene as showing love for Admetus, runs too many things together in visualising the children in the bedroom with Alcestis and in including them along with her husband as among those saved by her death.

⁶ Lines 287–8 ('I refused to live torn from you with orphaned children') do indeed imply a concept of family unity in which children and husband alike are involved, but even here her own enforced separation is given the main emphasis, and not any possible threat to

the children in such circumstances. L. Golden, *CJ* lxxi (1970–1) 119, claims that the text 'clearly indicates that Alcestis sacrifices herself for two basic reasons: her love for Admetus and her love for her children'; this obscures the subordinate role of one reason.

For good criticism of a similar argument see W. Zürcher, *Die Darstellung des Menschen im Drama des Euripides* (Basel 1947) 28. According to Burnett (n. 2) 35 'Husband, children, house and marriage make up a single ideal concept which her death will save.' Again, not all these factors come into operation at the same level; an unavoidable division in her commitment to the family unit is created by *her own* choice of death, and therein lies the dilemma which explains the subsequent action.

⁷ See Rivier (n. 2) ii 136–8 for criticism of attempts to avoid the clear implications of these lines.

her husband deserts her she finds that the demands of revenge take priority over her love for her children, and in spite of her love she murders them. Alcestis too, we may suppose, was faced with the dilemma of conflicting pulls; the bedroom scene, so brief and yet so powerful, tells us all we need to know of how these priorities were resolved.

Alcestis is helped from the house, accompanied by husband and children, to whom she sings farewell in lingering address (270–2). Her subsequent speech (280–325), with its lack of endearments for Admetus, its clear appraisal of the merits of her self-sacrifice, and its earnest argumentation, gives no grounds for suspicion of disillusionment or cooled affection, when due regard is paid to rhetorical idiom and with the bedroom episode in mind.⁸ She needs to establish her claim upon her husband's gratitude in order to secure her children's future, and the particular path which she follows is to ensure that he will not remarry (305–8). The main factors behind her plan, but not the process of ratiocination, have been presented already in the Servant's speech: prayer for the children's future; recognition that her husband will remarry; loving embrace of the children. These are enough to make her completed decision intelligible. All this is clear and most of it well-known; I only wish to consider in detail two features. First, why is one of the children a girl? All other children who figure importantly in Euripides are male. Alcestis herself gives us the reason when she argues that, while a stepmother is traditionally hostile to the offspring of her husband's former marriage, a son has at least got his father to aid him. But a daughter needs her mother's care throughout maidenhood and in finding a husband and even afterwards, at childbirth (313–19). So Alcestis' death leaves the family more vulnerable if one of the children is female, and consequently her argument against remarriage is all the more compelling. Thus we can see that Euripides has not given Alcestis children merely in order to increase the pathos of the death scene; boys would do as well as girls for that. But he has specifically planned her family for her in order to maximize the effect of the appeal; and this of course is an important part of the play, since it is because Admetus responds so whole-heartedly to her demand that he remain unmarried that he turns his life into a living death and so negates the value of her sacrifice. Incidentally it is obvious how thoroughly Alcestis' words conform to the inevitable but welcome destiny for a woman of the role of wife and mother. Far from being herself disillusioned, Alcestis sees what the future should have in store for her daughter, marriage and motherhood, and she is afraid lest her own death might imperil these prospects. All the more earnestly, then, does she appeal so as not to fail in the station of motherhood.

The second feature is Alcestis' solemn entrusting of her children to Admetus, as if she were surrendering them to him from her own sphere of responsibility:

Alcestis: Children, you yourselves have heard your father promising never to marry another wife over you and to dishonour me.

Admetus: And I say so now and I will do what I say.

Alcestis: On these conditions receive the children from my hands.

Admetus: I accept them, a beloved gift from a beloved hand.

Alcestis: You now become their mother instead of me.

Admetus: Indeed I must, since they have been robbed of you.

Alcestis: Children, when I should have lived, I am sinking to my death. (371–9)

The demand that he now replace her as mother suggests an attempt, inevitably futile, to fulfil her role as wife without reneging on the calls of motherhood; she will not be there but he will be mother in her stead. She dies ὅτε ζῆν χρῆν μ', and while no doubt this refers to her untimely death, it perhaps also acknowledges her obligation to her children. Thus the event memorably dramatised by the summons to the children to witness the promise and by the formal transfer from hand to hand captures her dilemma and underlines vividly the solution which will have such disastrous results for his future. This, the only explicit physical contact in the scene, again shows that the children are not on stage merely to enhance the pathos of the death scene, moving

⁸ See Dale (n. 2) xxiv–xxix for the fundamental interpretation of this speech.

though their contribution to this may well be. There is nothing here to suggest the passionate physical interaction reported by the Servant at lines 189–91 and which forms such a heart-rending spectacle in *Medea* and *Troades*. The frenzy of indulgence in the sensed experience of a loved child's presence is appropriate for a parent when a child is about to die, for it presents the agony from the lover's viewpoint. But the death of Alcestis is not here seen deeply from the children's viewpoint, so that the language of such a farewell would be the wrong note on which to end the scene. Again we see how Euripides' use of the children is controlled for specific effects.

III

Immediately after the death of Alcestis we have, in a remarkable shift of focus at lines 393–416, the largest vocal part for a child in Euripides. Problems of delivery do not concern us here. The style, conforming to the norm of tragic lyric apart from the colloquial $\mu\alpha\iota\alpha$ (393), sounds oddly artificial in a child's mouth, especially when combined with an adult point of view. However, realism is not to be expected in a genre where uniformity of style is the convention, and we should turn to the second of the three questions posed at the beginning: what is the dramatic point of having the child sing?

Some lament, however brief, is virtually obligatory at this point, but neither of the two main possible singers is appropriate. Admetus, the obvious choice, has his lament reserved for the *kommos* of lines 861–933, when on his return from the funeral he faces with full understanding of his misery the desolate home in which he must live without his wife. In the *kommos* his anapaests alternate with the lyrics of the chorus, and the scene serves the logic of the drama in that it expresses the utmost dejection directly prior to the restoration of Alcestis. A full lyric response at the earlier point would disturb this movement, for time is needed for Alcestis' arrangements to take effect; a brief lament might be perfunctory. Admetus is best left to grieve in silence until later. The other obvious candidate, the chorus, is not quite the right person, for their lament would preempt the response of the bereaved. The choice of the child therefore avoids some problems, in that a member of the immediate family laments while Admetus' full expression of grief is reserved for full effect. Further, the child's song rounds off the theme of motherhood. So much emphasis has been laid on Alcestis' concern that an immediate transition to another topic might seem abrupt. Since care for children plays a similar part in Alcestis' tragic dilemma as does his instinct for hospitality in that of Admetus, it is dramatically effective to have something weighty and visual to counterbalance his twice-repeated exercise of hospitality. He will be seen on the stage receiving Heracles and the veiled woman; appropriate prominence is now given to the object of Alcestis' concern.⁹

The boy who sings on behalf of his sister and himself—presumably such initiatives are more suitable for a boy—expresses in the strophe the shock of realisation that his mother is actually gone. He sees her closed eyes and limp hands, and calls on her in vain as he kisses her (393–403). In the antistrophe he sings of the impact of her death upon himself, his sister and his father: 'Now that you are gone, mother, our house has perished' (406–15).

The actuality of her death and its ruinous impact on the family, these are the themes of the song, so that as well as rounding off the previous scene it also prepares for what is to come. The suffering of the family is presented as a totally shared grief and the father is addressed three times at lines 395, 406, and 411, a unity of involvement which is echoed by the distich 404–5 with which he responds. However, as the course of the play will show, the distress of Admetus and his

⁹ T. Rosenmeyer, *The masks of tragedy* (New York 1971) 230–1 is locked into an excessively subtle psychologising approach when he says that Euripides has the child lament 'because all other characters on the stage are too rigidly caught up in their own interests and

complexities to respond with the proper candor and simplicity'. All others? Even the Chorus? And who else is there apart from these and Admetus? Steidle (n. 2) 133 well describes the powerful theatrical effect of a silent grieving Admetus.

children cannot be undifferentiated entirely, for his grief has an extra dimension arising from his position as beneficiary of the death which so harrows him. At this point, despite his genuine sorrow and the claim to understand the inevitability of her death (420–1), he has yet more to learn and suffer, and one important component of his ultimate insight into his misery will be shame at the vile misrepresentation of his behaviour by his enemies: ‘What have I gained with my life, being so wretched in fact and having so wretched a reputation?’ (960–1). But 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 (323–5), but only in the children’s case will there be no unfortunate backlash. The child’s song therefore has an important part to play in establishing a standard of uniform family grief out of which the particular grief of Admetus may be isolated.

IV

The episode ends with Admetus’s departure into the house to prepare for the funeral and presumably the children go with him at line 434. They might be expected to reappear when the cortège leaves, but in that case they would witness the ugly quarrel with Pheres. Then too they must return with the mourners and, since Admetus does not enter the house on his return, they would witness the miraculous return of the mother from whom they have so recently been parted. Astonishingly, their presence or absence is not mentioned. They figure only in Admetus’ imagined desolation (947–8), and are ignored in the action. One thing is certain: the woman who died as a wife and a mother is reborn only as a wife, and the presence of the children in the last scene would be a nuisance. It is therefore likeliest that they miss the funeral altogether and with it the rest of the play. And this is our third question, to explain this absence. It is a remarkable example of the poetic shaping of material and its dramatic purpose should be carefully considered.

The crucial point is obviously that only the reactions of Admetus are important. The children’s role, as analysed so far, has been directed to the development of the dilemma of Alcestis and the expression of unified family grief, but so completely is Admetus the focus of attention at the end of the play that, amazingly, not even Alcestis herself is permitted a comment of any sort. Whether Euripides made a dramatic virtue out of a theatrical necessity of a restricted cast, or whether he simply preferred this most beautiful silence, he has in any case deflected any concern with what Alcestis might think about her rescue. And if she herself, snatched from the grip of death, is not to be consulted, then there can be no place for the children whose dramatic life is fundamentally ancillary to hers. It is no concept of the reunion of the whole family which controls the material here, and nothing should be read into the absence of the children here where domestic realism might welcome their presence.

Thus the absence of the children leads into the study of the reaction of Admetus. Seeking the explanation of this reaction in earlier scenes, it seems to me that Euripides has used the children in a way which contributes to the audience’s understanding of Admetus as a man of a certain character,¹⁰ and this will be the foundation for the proposal which I now make for a necessary

¹⁰ Use of the term ‘character’ does not entail the belief that Euripides has imagined his stage figures to represent people with detailed personalities, or that he designed each and every utterance to contribute something to an audience’s perception of a certain sort of individual mind, this purpose having precedence over any other function of dramatic language. Rather it implies that, in this case, Admetus has been conceived as a figure who will impress an audience as a bearer of a few traits to be taken as characteristic of him and significant in connection with his part in the action. One

does not need to think of him as a detailed character-study to feel that Dale (n. 2) xxvii goes too far in saying that Euripides had no particular interest in the sort of person Admetus is apart from his *δοσιότης*. See Steidle (n. 2) 141, who finds this incredible, and Conacher (n. 2) 3. Admetus must have other traits. For instance, while Dale notes that he provokes Pheres’ counterblast by ‘the unfilial violence and exaggeration of the attack’, she thinks that the outburst is sufficiently accounted for by the smooth shamelessness of his father’s opening words (notes on 614 and 697). But this prejudices Pheres and is

adjustment in what I take to be the substantially correct critical view of Admetus as virtuous.

It is noteworthy but understandable that, while critics who treat Admetus as morally feeble find an inexhaustible arsenal in his quarrel with Pheres, upholders of his virtues give no convincing defence of details of his behaviour. It is easily shown that the charge of cowardice is false, and certainly Pheres' refusal to die for his son was less than noble when he might well have risen gloriously to the occasion, and others as well as Admetus criticize him for that. Nevertheless, Pheres defends himself with great force, and some at least of Admetus' attack is hard to reconcile with nobility of spirit. Modern arguments in favour of Admetus here are sometimes strained, usually brief, and sometimes non-existent.¹¹ It is hard to accept that all the content of his attack, as well as its manner, can be ascribed to rhetorical idiom. Consider for example lines 658–61: 'You will not say that you let me down when I dishonoured you in old age, because I have been full of consideration. And in return for this, look at the thanks which you and my mother gave me' (κάντι τῶνδέ μοι χάρις τοιάνδε καὶ σὺ χῆ τεκοῦσ' ἠλλαξάτην). Admetus starts by ruling out a possible excuse: Pheres' betrayal might be understandable in circumstances which don't apply in fact. But he goes on to regard Pheres' behaviour as gross *ingratitude* in return for his impeccable support. Surely Admetus is here, as elsewhere in the scene, claiming as a duty a sacrifice which could never be anything other than an act of supreme heroism, and although one should not read off from his apparent obtuseness here the state of mind which led him to accept Alcestis' offer in the first place—Euripides deliberately avoids that issue throughout—nevertheless, *some* state of mind seems indicated. Rhetoric intrudes in other set speeches in Euripides, but in a way that is broadly compatible with the speaker's character broadly understood, and the same should apply here. Everything which Pheres says seems consistent with a certain temperament and viewpoint; although Alcestis' expression is argumentative, what she says suits a noble character who dies for husband while loving children; so why not with Admetus? Even at the very end of the scene Admetus repudiates his parents in a way that cannot be explained as a paradox of a formal rhesis: he would publically disown them if necessary (734–8). This is indeed paradoxical, but surely it is horrid too.

It is generally agreed that an important function of the scene is to prompt in Admetus the realisation that he has lost credit at large because his acceptance of Alcestis' sacrifice lays him

implausible unless account is taken of the anticipation of the outburst at lines 338–39; but then, as I argue, in view of the differences of feeling in the way Alcestis and Admetus address the same points, we have an invitation to see one Admetus behind his behaviour in both scenes.

¹¹ Attempts to justify Admetus in this scene usually do not allow sufficient weight to Pheres' side; e.g. Lesky (n. 2) 281–2 regards Pheres as condemned by the *communis opinio* of the play, but this, in my view, since it amounts only to Alcestis and the Chorus (290, 470), in passages which praise Alcestis by comparison rather than denounce Pheres, is true but less than decisive; Lesky adds that Pheres has no justification for his refusal and 'er ist auch sonst als defekt gezeichnet', with reference to line 726. Burnett (n. 2) 40–3 treats Pheres as a hypocrite, and has Admetus' attack reflecting Apollo's confrontation with Death and Heracles' conflict at the tomb: 'the spectator is left with the subrational sense that the ugly figure whom Apollo allowed to enter the house has now been driven off by its master'. But Admetus hardly masters Pheres, quite the reverse, and his very attack has self-defeating aspects. Rivier (n. 2) ii 134 warns that it is wrong in practice to take the scene as point of departure for examining Admetus, since dramatic events happen in sequence and later statements cannot alter earlier; but this does not justify his dismissal of Pheres' attitude and conduct as that of a *κακός*. Lloyd

(n. 2) 121, 129, refers to the scene as a re-enactment of Pheres' refusal to die, not Admetus', with Admetus rightly repudiating the other's complacency; surely some argument is needed here to support the thesis that 'Admetus behaves correctly throughout the play'. A more balanced view of the *agon* is found in Dale (n. 2) *ad loc.* (cf. n. 10), who sees Pheres as victor on points in the debate, although being morally in the wrong. Steidle (n. 2) 143 well stresses the notion that while there is moral pressure on Pheres to die (he is old, Admetus is young), this falls short of a duty, and to this extent he has a defence. The fullest and in my view the best discussion is that of Rohdich (n. 2) 32–8, who allows full validity to Pheres' counter-principle of universal love of life in response to the censorious invective which Admetus inherits from the heroic Alcestis. This seems to me to be on the right lines, except that Admetus needs to be autonomous and distinct from Alcestis' attitudes. Another good point is in Bergson (n. 2) 12: Pheres thinks mortal thoughts by contrast with Admetus who seeks for a life 'beyond destiny'. B. Vickers, *Towards Greek tragedy* (London 1973) 116–19 in his brief account of the play vividly describes a reader's conflicting responses to opposing, valid viewpoints: Pheres indeed had but little time to give up for Alcestis, but 'what right has Admetus to demand from his father the few remaining weeks or months of life?'

open to a false charge of cowardice, and that this insight is structurally crucial since it constitutes the low-water mark before the return to unimagined joy. He can find no escape from sorrow inside the house, and outside there will be reminders of his wife and the thought of slander (950–60). His grief, we might suppose, could have been tolerable if he could feel the support of united popular condolence. Considering this essential movement from the poet's viewpoint, let us ask how Admetus can be brought to this understanding. Only enemies hold the false view of his behaviour, but it is uneconomical to intrude an enemy into the private family occasion, and so it must be a friend who tells him. No friend would do so in such inappropriate circumstances as a bereavement, unless reacting to extraordinary provocation. The father who refused to die will serve with brilliant economy, for he is a foil to the noble saviour too. But justified criticism is an insufficient stimulus, for Pheres would then be truly a coward and his counter-attack mere malice. He is well-born and the father of the hero, and simply cannot be thoroughly ignoble. He must then be no worse than less than heroic, and he must have a genuinely sound case. Such a friend would only lash out in the required way in response to an *unjustified* attack and in these circumstances will be stung into using views which he does not personally hold and which he would not otherwise mention. The logic of the drama demands that Admetus should be seriously wrong.

We should not gloss over Admetus' behaviour, which has to be sufficiently outrageous to help him bring about his realisation of the depth of his misery, and yet, since the play only makes sense if he is truly noble both in his regard for Alcestis and in his instinct for hospitality, his treatment of Pheres should be all of a piece. I think it can be seen to be so, if we remember that it is not just Alcestis' dying wish for him to remain unmarried that turns his life into a desert, but his reaction to that wish. That reaction is not controlled by her, but depends upon the sort of person that he is, and Admetus, by contrast with the basically normal Pheres, has about him a touch of the extraordinary, as have Alcestis and Heracles, each in his own way.

In Admetus' proposed life of mourning two features are stressed, fidelity to his wife and hatred of his parents. Both derive from her dying words, but both are heightened in his response and are transformed into characteristics of his personality.¹² First, Alcestis wants him to remain unmarried for the sake of the children (304–5). Apart from this, she earlier seems to take the prospect of his remarriage for granted with no sign of bitterness (181–2), and later she assures him that his grief will fade in time (381). His immediate response, however, leaps far beyond her request. His avowal that he wants no more children implies acceptance of her reasoning (334–5), and he accepts the role of mother-substitute (377–8), but his protestations of fidelity are based not on concern for the children but on his commitment to her as his wife: 'I had you as my wife in life and you alone will be called my wife in death' (328–30). This devotion, not perhaps in itself very remarkable, he is prepared to take to truly extraordinary lengths: he will mourn for the rest of his life (336–7); reminders in art and dreams will keep her permanently present (348–56); he will eventually be buried by her side in the very same coffin (363–8). It is this extravagant, passionate loyalty to her, excluding him not only from marriage but from any sexual relationship with women (1056–61), and even from their company (950–4), that he maintains throughout the play. The *grounds* of her request and of his acceptance are the same—recognition of the greatness of her sacrifice—but the *proposal* which she makes, not to remarry for the children's sake, is swallowed up in his proposal of lifelong devotion to her memory.

¹² Of course, both these features and their later recurrence are commonly discussed, and are taken together by critics of Admetus' character. I also want to stress that they are indicative of his character and should be taken together, but not of a superficial or ridiculous character. His speech seems more distinctive than a rhetorical development of typical bereavement, as Rivier (n. 2) i 139 suggests, and too far from Alcestis in tone for it to be her act speaking through him, he himself having only the one character trait of hospita-

lity, as Rohdich (n. 2) 30–1 thinks. That the speech is difficult for those who do not wish to damn Admetus is shown by the disquiet of Lesky (n. 2) 294, who suggests that the hyperboles are meant to show the impossibility of the situation in which Admetus is placed, an idea which leads into the friction between myth and the real world which is a stable point round which many discussions of the play's meaning turn; but surely an interpretation in terms of character, if available, is simpler and more consistent.

The second feature also reveals a capacity for extreme response. In establishing her claim upon his gratitude Alcestis underlines the magnitude of her sacrifice of her youth and rich alternatives by contrast with the behaviour of his parents, who had so little to give up and could have won so much renown (282–94). If they had risen to the challenge, she adds, she and Admetus would have lived out their lives together and he would not be left bereaved with orphaned children (295–7). 'But', she goes on, 'it was some god's will that things turned out like this' (ἀλλὰ ταῦτα μὲν θεῶν τις ἐξέπραξεν ὥσθ' οὕτως ἔχειν, 297–8). There is no word here for hatred, only the frank 'betrayed' (προὔδοσαν, 290), to contrast with her own saving sacrifice. There may be pride here, but surely the final note is resignation, and there is no sign of bitterness. But when Admetus picks up the comparison at lines 336–41, the emotional charge is different: 'I shall grieve not for a year but for a lifetime, hating my mother and father, for they were false friends' (στρυγῶν μὲν ἦ μ' ἔτικτεν, ἐχθαίρων δ' ἐμὸν πατέρα). This is the affirmation which he will put into effect when Pheres comes to the funeral; the repeated words for hatred, rhetorically balanced, contrast sharply with the emotionally muted language of Alcestis. Again, then, Admetus meets his wife's words with a ferocity of temper and a proposal which quite transcends its source.¹³ He shows himself in this crisis to be a person of very different temperament from his wife, as indeed the servants may have found him to be in more routine circumstances (770–1).

Euripides is making Admetus a paradigmatic instance of grief at its most extreme, and he gives him a character to suit, for he is rather more than a typical distracted husband. He is like Theseus who, seeing the letter in his dead wife's hand, at once assumes that it contains her last wishes relating to their marriage and children, and immediately promises not to remarry (*Hipp.* 858–61), and yet he is unlike him in the extravagance of the ways he declares he will express his grief. He is also like Theseus in his hatred of those thought to be connected with his wife's death; both men act on information from the dead woman, but whereas Phaedra accuses and lies and so misleads her husband, Admetus himself distorts his wife's words. Both are wrong, for Hippolytus was innocent and Pheres was under no obligation to die, and the mistake brings further sorrow upon their own heads. There is nothing resembling Phaedra's lie to lead Admetus astray, and there is nowhere else to look for an explanation except his character. He is of course no Heracles, as events show, and he admits that he cannot emulate Orpheus' raid on Hades (357–52). But only a person who has something larger than life about him is capable of such a commitment, and along with this he exhibits the intolerance often inseparable from the concentration necessary for high achievement. Again, his immoderate absorption in his grief is both strength and weakness at once, bringing him to the nadir of misery through provoking his father's revelation but maintaining unwavering fidelity until the miraculous restoration.¹⁴

Admetus' repudiation of Pheres is part of his narrow, intense vision. It is the ugly, intolerant side of a grief which overrides sympathy for others. Pheres is unheroic and self-centred, and he might have reacted more generously by making allowance for his son's distraction, as Heracles does (1017–18), but it is quite unfair to dismiss him as κακός, and to point to the low place honour occupies in his priorities and to his assessment of self-sacrifice as folly (725–6), without noticing that here he speaks in anger, stung by an unmerited slight. If he is going to be attacked like this, then he too can show that his accuser's position may be seen in a dubious light.

In this way we have a Pheres who is not all bad, and an Admetus whose weakness defenders of his virtues do not have to ignore. In a different play Admetus' great virtue could have been

¹³ It is just as important to note the difference in tone as the connection of thought and the reappearance of the material in the attack of Pheres. Evenness of tone is assumed by Rohdich (n. 1) 34: the attack on Pheres reveals 'den Geist der Alkestis, der aus ihm spricht, weil er mit ihm eingeworden ist'. Nor should the later ferocity be read back into her words, cf. H. Erbse, *Philologus* cxvi (1972) 44, who sees Alcestis as full of bitter reproaches which Admetus takes over. Rather the bitterness is his alone.

¹⁴ For heroic intolerance of the unheroic in Sophocles compare the treatment of their more ordinary sisters by Antigone (*Ant.* 86–7) and Electra (*El.* 357–73); and for hidden truths revealed in angry retaliation at a domineering attack compare the reaction of Teiresias to Oedipus (*O.T.* 350) and to Creon (*Antig.* 1060). Admetus is in noble company.

filial piety and there would be a different Pheres. As things are, however, his great virtue, guaranteed by god and hero (10, 858–60), is hospitality. It is a measure of his deep instinct for hospitality that he is twice compelled to modify the totality of his mourning, whereas his grief brushes aside even filial piety, and for this purpose too Pheres cannot be allowed to forfeit respect entirely. The scene highlights by contrast both the greatness of Alcestis' self-sacrifice and the purity of Admetus' regard for hospitality which, although incompatible with his mourning, resembles it in that it is exercised beyond the reach of ordinary mortals (551–2, 597–603).

Now it is time to return to our question and consider the significance of the absence of the children from the end of the play. They have formed a link between husband and wife in two ways, as her charge to him which helps to shape his destiny and, in the child's song, as an expression of the united grief of the family at her death. But in both cases Admetus' reaction goes far beyond the base points and becomes something more intense and characteristically *his*. Accordingly, when he is faced with the unavoidable obligation in the final scene of taking a woman into his house, and is forced to give reasons why he does not wish to do so and why he will never marry again, we should not expect any reference to the promise exacted from him for the children's sake, for that consideration has been entirely swallowed in his dominating regard for Alcestis alone. The children's absence from Admetus' vision is, one might say, almost as important for the play as is their presence in that of Alcestis. It is part and parcel of the necessary dramatic character he has been given.

Twice the action comes to a point where the matter of a stepmother might be raised. When Admetus first refuses the girl he argues that there is nowhere for her to stay, the men's quarters being unsafe for a girl and his wife's bedroom unsafe for his own credit (1049–61). Since in the latter case he fears a double reproach, from his wife as well as from public opinion, there can be no question of such accommodation merely seeming bad but being blameless, for his wife would know the truth, and Admetus must be saying that he cannot take the girl in for to do so would be either to fail in his duty to Heracles to protect his ward, or to fail in his duty to Alcestis. And since there is no talk of marriage with the girl—why should there be? She will only be a servant if kept (1024)—the threatened duty must be that of sexual fidelity. Of course the argument is brilliant rather than sound—the rhetorical idiom does not imply that he contemplates sleeping with her in fact, and the ward would not be returned intact to Heracles in any case, not to mention the implausibility of there being no further accommodation available. Nevertheless, the rhetoric builds on Admetus' vow of sexual fidelity and not on his promise to avoid a stepmother.

More strikingly, when Heracles goes on to console Admetus by saying that in time he will marry again—not of course the supposed prize, for, disregarding the overtones of dramatic irony, they are not talking about her at all in lines 1072–96—it becomes clear that Admetus really means never to remarry. When asked directly to say what good he thinks he is doing Alcestis by that, instead of replying with reference to the stepmother he answers entirely in terms of his unrestricted respect for her:

Ηρ. μῶν τήν θανοῦσαν ὠφελεῖν τι προσδοκᾷ;

Αδ. κείνην ὅπουπερ ἔστι τιμᾶσθαι χρεῶν.

(1091–92)

The children are absent because we are to see Admetus as a certain sort of man who, because he is that sort of man, persists in his vocation. The humdrum issue of the children's future, along with the ugliness of the quarrel with Pheres, is stripped away. These are necessary for us to see how Admetus arrives at the point at which he now stands, but only for something pure and grand will the critical imagination be charmed into believing that a miracle might happen—as it does at once.

And here perhaps the children might be allowed their silent say. There is a parallelism in the dilemmas of Alcestis and Admetus. Each is utterly devoted to the other but must give regard to something else. Her dilemma is repeated in his, with the darker mood lightened by the audience's anticipation of the imminent resolution. She gives her status as wife priority over her

care for her children, and yet maintains her care by her dying request; he will devote his life to her memory and yet cannot abandon the obligation of hospitality. As her surrender of her motherhood to him is dramatised by the formal transfer of the children from her hands to his (375–6), so now his acceptance of his obligation of hospitality even at the price of introducing the pain of living into the living death which he has taken from her is expressed visually in the slow process by which he is brought, with eyes almost comically averted, to take his new ward by the hand (1117–20).¹⁵ The essential dilemma of both is captured by the graphic gesture; but the later transfer marks the dilemma of Admetus as a husband and host, while the earlier marks that of Alcestis as a wife and mother.¹⁶

Finally, a general remark about the relevance of this discussion to the question of characterisation in tragedy. If it is correct to take Admetus as essentially virtuous as husband and host, then Pheres' accusation of cowardice must be false. Admetus' own supposed behaviour in the original circumstances has no part in the drama. When we learn at lines 15–18 that he did approach all his friends and found no substitute except his wife, we are not invited to speculate whether her offer was personally solicited or spontaneous, how he responded, or whether he had the option of refusing. Then suddenly Pheres presents one possible construction with a charge of cowardice, which remains unrefuted because Admetus' whole attack is directed against what he too sees as craven betrayal. If true, Pheres' charge cannot force a readjustment of our assessment of Admetus' relationship with Alcestis, but simply conflicts with it and baffles the attempt to see the two sides of Admetus as belonging to one person, given the play as we have it and not one of countless other possibilities. We would be forced into recognition of some kaleidoscopic concept of dramatic structure in which consistency of characterisation has little priority. But if Pheres is wrong, are we any better off? Unless Admetus' aggression is explained—and attempts at justification in terms of his father's supposed moral shortcomings are unconvincing—Euripides appears to have introduced a brilliant, bitter scene with only token regard for consistency of character. The general profit to be derived from attention to the role of the children after the death of Alcestis is recognition of the domination of the end of the play by an Admetus who consistently adds something of heroic reach and intensity to his exercise of fidelity and hospitality, and the quarrel with Pheres becomes intelligible in terms of this extra dimension while itself contributing to the consolidation of the individualised central figure without which the outcome of the play hardly makes sense. Admetus, then, to say the least, supplies no evidence of discontinuity in Euripidean characterisation.¹⁷

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¹⁵ Even without lines 1119–20, condemned by U. Hübner, *Hermes* cix (1981) 156–66, the logic of the scene seems at least as well served by contact at 1118 as at 1135, and I would say better in fact. Heracles insists on entrusting the woman as a ward to Admetus' own hands, and there are four references to touch in five lines (1113–16). It seems logical that he should take hold of her before he sees who she is. It is not at all clear that this first contact would spoil the second, the embrace of the reunited pair, or that *θιγείν* (1117) cannot refer to the first while *θίγω* (1131) refers to the second.

¹⁶ The scene may also suggest a repeated solemnisa-

tion of the original marriage of Admetus and Alcestis, for at weddings the bridegroom took the bride by the hand, and at some stage of the ceremony she was unveiled; cf. R. G. A. Buxton, *Dodone* xiv (1985) 75–89, especially 77, 80. Such an allusion need only be additional, not alternative to the interpretation in the text, which is supported by the parallel staging of the earlier transfer, and the wedding symbolism would be reinforced by the absence of the children.

¹⁷ I am grateful to the Editor of *JHS* for the reference in n. 16 and for helpful comments in general.