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**Death as a Problem to be Solved:**

**The Philosophy of Death and Dying in Euripides’ *Alcestis***



Peyron, Pierre. *The Death of Alcestis*. 1794, Louvre, Paris. [*The Death of Alcestis – NCMALearn (ncartmuseum.org)*](https://learn.ncartmuseum.org/artwork/the-death-of-alcestis/)

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# Introduction

Much has been written about Alcestis: she has been studied as the “best wife to Admetus, best mother to her children, best mistress to the servants” (Luschnig 6) and as the feminine heroic equivalent of Homeric heroes like Patroclus and Hector (cf. Garner). In many studies of the *Alcestis*, this concept of ‘feminine heroism’ and gender dynamics in the play take the central stage: it is argued that Admetus is effeminized while Alcestis, through her victory as a hero, is masculinized (Padilla 193). The play’s ending is then seen as the rectification of these gender roles. Visvardi states that this gender reversal is the key in most scholars’ interpretations: “the idea here is that Admetus’ effeminate feelings lead him to a significant realization of the conditions of mortality” (71). Segal adds to this perspective that the gender dynamic is not only about these processes, but also about the gender dynamic in crying, stating that “for a man to weep for himself is to risk feminization” (148). The gender reversal is largely based on Alcestis’ self-sacrifice and resulting heroism, that is thus seen as the feminine equivalent of other, masculine, heroes. Murnaghan argues that Alcestis dies and becomes a heroine because “being a survivor is so wretched she would rather die” (114), the journey of Admetus being one of grieving; Luschnig, on the other hand, posits that the play is about Alcestis achieving her identity as heroic and as the *best*, and her trying to maintain this image by averting the generalization of her actions and herself as a person. Indeed, Alcestis is described as ἀρίστη (*Alc*. 151), which her resurrection emphasizes: “the resurrection shows us to what heroic class the sacrifice belongs” (Luschnig 39). It is true that the motif of resurrection is uncommon in stories about mortals and that this gift is not bestowed upon just any mortal. A rich analysis of this motif has been written by Sarah Iles-Johnston, who distinguishes various types of resurrection, which will be explored later. Interestingly, Johnston notes that there may have been another version of the story of Alcestis “in which Persephone or all the gods, admiring Alcestis’ courage, freely decide to send her back to the world of the living” (21). In all of the types, resurrection itself is not problematic – it is a “special dispensation that a god might bestow, or that a particularly clever mortal might devise” (23). Instead, it is the crossing of boundaries set by the gods that makes a resurrection problematic. While Alcestis may have been bestowed this special dispensation by Persephone in another version of the tale, Euripides’ *Alcestis* does not include this element and does not focus on Alcestis’ courage, as Johnston suggests (21). The motif of resurrection in this play is a symptom of the play’s central subject: the mortality of humankind. Admetus is the first one to be saved from his immediate death by the god Apollo, like Alcestis will later be saved by Heracles to postpone her death. As a result of his (figurative) resurrection before the start of the play, Admetus holds a view of death that does not fit a mortal: he considers death as a problem to be solved, for example by Alcestis dying in his stead or Pheres sacrificing himself. However, he is the only one with the non-mortal delusion that death can be continuously postponed, as the other characters try to show him.

Alcestis’ death has thus been studied for its (feminine) heroic qualities, concluding that the *Alcestis* “shows her being heroic, stealing the show, directing the other parts” (Luschnig 13). Admetus, too, has been studied as the central character, posing that the lesson Admetus must learn as the tragic hero is one of grieving and mourning (Segal 143). While these aspects do play a role in the *Alcestis*, I argue that it is only through taking Admetus as the central, tragic character as well as looking at the themes of death and mortality that the dynamics within the play can truly be understood and interpreted. Through juxtaposing the different perspectives and discussing the motifs of heroism, (im)mortality and (ir)replaceability, this thesis looks at the views on death and mortality of various characters and their interactions with Admetus, concluding that, as Admetus himself learns, death is not a problem that can be solved.

# Pheres and Heracles: Two Visions on Death and Dying

Before looking at the position of Admetus (and Alcestis) in the play’s philosophy on life and death, it is important to start with two more peripheral characters: Heracles and Pheres. Heracles is not only an important figure because of his role in Alcestis’ resurrection: the other scenes in which he features also play a significant role in the existential discussions around death and dying in the play. However, as Justina Gregory highlights, the figure of a drinking Heracles fits awkwardly in the play and brings up the problem of *Alcestis’* genre. There has already been much debate on the play’s genre: as “the fourth play in its tetralogy” (Visvardi 59), the Greek audience would have expected a satyr play, but that is not what the *Alcestis* is. While the play does feature satyric elements such as Olympian mythology (Apollo’s punishment by Zeus) and folktale elements (the story of Alcestis and Admetus), it also “treats suffering and themes typical of serious tragedy” (63), such as leading characters drawn from myth and “the Chorus’ function in directing our sympathies” (63). However, because of the evolving nature of tragedy in the fifth century, “generic specifications and expectations are or should be treated with particular caution” (62), thus nuancing the assignment of these elements to these respective genres[[1]](#footnote-1). Gregory follows the view of the play’s dual character and cites various descriptions of the play as “a hybrid drama” (113) and a “miniature play [or a] miniature satyr play” (113). The expectations of the play’s original audience are important to keep in mind, especially where the characters of Pheres and Heracles are concerned. While a philosophizing, drinking Heracles is not unfit for a satyr play, it is thus more awkwardly placed in a tragedy. However, Heracles’ importance runs deeper than merely reflecting the hybrid nature of the *Alcestis* and Gregory points out that “Euripides … tends to associate his references to drinking with the *carpe diem* admonitions of popular philosophy” (118). The philosophical nature of Euripides’ Heracles is already implicated in the first scene that features Heracles, in which Admetus receives him as a guest. Heracles arrives in Pherai by coincidence, although it is prophesized by Apollo, and not as a goal in itself: he is on his way to Thrace to accomplish a labour for Eurystheus, to capture the horses of Diomedes. In his conversation with Admetus, he acknowledges his knowledge of Alcestis’ vow to die instead of Admetus and advises the latter: “Oh, do not mourn your wife beforehand! Put it off till the day!” (*Alc.* 526) Admetus answers: “Someone who is doomed to die is dead, has died and is no more.” (527) However, Heracles in turn argues: “Existence and non-existence are deemed to be separate things.” (528) Here, as Admetus himself also states, Heracles and Admetus have a different view on living and dying: where Admetus sees Alcestis as dead the moment she has made her vow, Heracles does not. Further in the play, in the scene where Heracles meets a servant, the play elaborates on this. Heracles asks the servant: “Do you know the nature of our mortal life?” (780) Death is inevitable, he explains, it is a debt that every mortal must pay, but it is one that we will not foresee: “no man knows for certain whether he will still be living on the morrow” (783-4). So, he claims, “regard this day’s life as yours but all else as Fortune’s!” (788-9) Or: *carpe diem*. What other option is there? – “As for those who are solemn and knit their brows, their life, in my judgement, is no life worthy of the name but merely a disaster.” (800-2) However, Heracles changes his behaviour instantly when he learns that it is actually Alcestis who has died. It is not that he criticizes Admetus or the servant for mourning at all – mourning also has its place – but he criticizes excessive mourning (τὴν ἄγαν λύπην, 794). The hybrid aspect of the play’s genre reflects Heracles’ philosophy on life and death well: like both the tragic and satyric elements within the play, in life there is a place for serious matters, for mourning and suffering, but not in excess. It is best to enjoy today and to save mourning and suffering for when it is necessary, because it is impossible to know what the gods have in store tomorrow.

Another philosophical discussion is brought forward by Admetus’ quarrel with his father, Pheres. Here, the play poses “issues of loyalty and obligation … what does a father owe his son?” (Gregory, 119). When Pheres arrives at Admetus’ house, he comes bearing offerings for Alcestis. He is grateful to her: “she died to save your life, my son, and did not leave me childless or let me waste away in a stricken old age bereft of you” (*Alc.* 620-22). Admetus does not invite him in as a guest, however, and makes clear that he is not pleased with his father. He accuses him: “You stood aside and, though you are old, allowed a young person to die: you will now come to mourn her?” (634-5) It is clear that they, similar to Heracles, share different views on living and dying. Admetus sees Pheres’ old age as reason enough to die in his stead: “for though you are so old and have come to the end of your life, yet you refused and had not the courage to die for your own son” (643-5). Admetus believes there is little reason for Pheres to continue living, because he had little time left to live anyway. This echoes his statement to Heracles that, once you know you might die, you are as good as dead. The difference between that statement and this argument towards Pheres, is that Pheres also refuses to die honourably. If Pheres had died for Admetus, had sacrificed himself for his son, “it would have been a noble contest to enter” (648). Pheres disagrees, however. First he states that it is not his duty to die for Admetus – “I am not obliged to die for you” (682) – it is Admetus’ problem and Admetus’ responsibility: “For you are happy or unhappy for yourself alone.” (685) Whereas Admetus continuously lets his happiness depend on the actions of others, Pheres states that everyone is responsible for their own happiness. He further stresses that he has fulfilled all his paternal duties, has done all he is responsible for as a father, but that he will not sacrifice his life. He says: “You enjoy looking on the light. Do you think your father does not? Truly I regard the time below as long and life as short but sweet for all that.” (691-3) Here is a crucial aspect of Pheres’ accusations: Admetus claims, though perhaps unknowingly, that certain lives are less worth living and that certain deaths are less meaningful than others. Admetus asks his father: “Is death the same thing for a man in his prime as for an old man?” (711) He does not seem to understand that Pheres would turn away the opportunity to die a noble death: “die you shall, and die with no good name” (725). Why would his father not sacrifice himself, if Alcestis does? “We must live with a single life, not with two” (712), Pheres argues, “When I am gone, I care not what men say.” (726) Both Heracles and Pheres, then, press the mortal aspect of human existence: according to Heracles, because a man cannot know what the gods have in store, he must live a mortal life by acknowledging the fact that anyone can die at any given moment. Pheres presses that every life is equal, as is every death – a mortal has only one (short) life to lead and it must be lived accordingly. Admetus opposes this: in his mind, death is not absolute. His vision on life and death pushes the boundaries of what it means to be mortal; after all, has he, because of Apollo, not evaded death once before? He ignores the fact that every mortal is to die by posing that the person “who is doomed to die is dead, has died and is no more” (527) – positioning himself outside of his own mortal nature, as he will continue to do throughout the play. These existential discussions with Heracles and Pheres show that the central object of the play is the mortality of man and how Admetus must deal with this.

# The Case of Dying a Hero: Alcestis and the Homeric Heroes

The *Alcestis* is thus about the mortality of man. The beginning of the play, like the scenes discussed above, already illustrate this and frame the whole play in this philosophical context. Apollo speaks about the actions that have taken place before the start of the play: how Zeus killed his son, Asclepius. This is not an insignificant reference, since Asclepius was punished because he cheated Death. Still, Apollo tries to cheat Death as well by tricking the Fates into promising him “that Admetus could escape an immediate death by giving in exchange another corpse to the powers below” (*Alc.* 12-64). The question is why. Apollo says: “I am myself godly, and in Admetus, son of Pheres, I found a godly man. And so I rescued him from death” (10-11). This fits into the motif of getting around dying (by cheating Death) in Greek literature, since it can only be bestowed by a god. The differences between Apollo and Asclepius are that, first, Apollo is immortal and Asclepius was not. Second, that in the case of Apollo, another body takes the place of Admetus, not changing the amount of bodies sent to the underworld, just changing *who* is.Still, as the whole of the *Alcestis* shows, Admetus ends up horribly unhappy because of this gift that Apollo has bestowed upon him. Apollo is also reproached for his actions by Death: “Are you engaged in more injustice, curtailing and annulling the prerogatives of the gods below?” (30-1) Death speaks of justice and injustice – someone *must* die. Apollo tries, still, to get him to grant a delay, but Death refuses. Death further highlights the fact that it does not matter as much to him who dies, as long as someone does. To him, there is little distinction whether Admetus dies or Alcestis dies, because they will both die sometime anyway – for immortals, death is not something particular or fixed. This is different from the mortal experience of death, which is absolute: it matters to a mortal who dies. This was already present in Heracles’ criticism on the state of mourning in Pherai, where he criticized the mourning of a random member of the house (“The woman who died is no relation. Do not grieve so excessively.” (805-6)), but changed his behaviour when he learns that is Alcestis who died. What follows between Apollo and Death is an argumentation that is similar to the conversation between Admetus and Pheres. Apollo indeed points out to Death that he will have Alcestis in the end anyway, so why must she die at this point in time? “I win greater honour when the victims are young” (55), Death argues. Apollo counterargues: “And yet if she dies old, she will receive a rich burial” (56). Because mortals die anyway, as Death has stated, the play asks its audience not whether to die, but: Is it better to die old than young? That is in the end the choice that Alcestis and Admetus make: Alcestis chooses to die young and a heroine, Admetus old and unhappy. However, Death points out that Apollo’s argument is not a sound one: “The law you are trying to establish, Phoebus, is to the advantage of the rich. (…) Those with means could buy death at an advanced age.” (56, 58). The problem here is one that is also present in Admetus’ perspective on death, as if it is a problem that can be solved – people buying their way out of death is against mortal law*.* Apollo might think he is saving Admetus with his gift of later death instead of an immediate death – regarding death as a problem that can be (temporarily) solved – but Admetus ends up wishing he was dead anyway (“I wish I could die!” (864)). This is not unimportant, because the *Alcestis* illustrates that mortals can only be saved from an immediate death, not death altogether (cf. Luschnig): even Alcestis, after she is resurrected, will die again. If, unlike Apollo and Death, death looms over all the other characters’ lives, Alcestis shows how it is not about *whether* she dies, but *when* she dies. Whereas Admetus sees himself as outside of time, as belonging more to the godly than to mankind, Alcestis does not. It is because she chooses to die at that moment in time that she saves Admetus, so that he might live the rest of his life and that she will be regarded as a heroine.

Alcestis’ death and this consequential heroism have also been compared to the Homeric heroes Patroclus and Hector: as Patroclus dies for Achilles, so does Alcestis for Admetus. Furthermore, Achilles has the same choice to make as Admetus did: die soon or die later. Thematically, this is a significant similarity, not least because it offers a thematical context to the *Alcestis*, but also because it equates Alcestis’ sacrifice (and heroism) to Patroclus’ sacrifice – “she has matched the feat of a male hero” (Garner 62). Garner also compares her to Hector, in that “Apollo has tried, both for Hector and for Alcestis, to keep death away; but at this point the end has become inevitable for both mortal creatures.” (63). This parallel, Garner further argues, also signifies a reversal of roles in the *Alcestis*: where Andromache begs Hector not to abandon her, so will Admetus beg Alcestis not to do the same thing. But what exactly makes Alcestis’ choice heroic? The heroes of the *Iliad* often occupy themselves with what death could mean: future fame and reputation. Achilles considers “the alternatives of long life without a heritage of fame as opposed to a shorter life with undying fame” (65). This has also been an important focus in the analyses of Alcestis’ heroism. Like Patroclus and Hector, she will die young with undying fame, differing in the fact that Alcestis’ fame “will depend instead on her having died for a man, her husband” (65-6). Luschnig attempts to explain Alcestis’ motivation for her sacrifice by stating that Alcestis is trying to protect “her vision of herself and her hopes for the preservation of that image in the minds of all” (7). In this interpretation, Alcestis’ vision is centred completely on her marriage and her role as mother: “the play is about marriage, in life and death” (44). Because only one can be the best wife and mother, a status she possesses as an identity, she must fight generalization – she cannot be the *best* if she is like any other woman (cf. Luschnig 10). Luschnig further argues that Alcestis

sees the beginning of her married life at its end. This is an aspect of her aesthetic vision: to see her life and death as a complete action with a beginning, middle, and end … And thus Alcestis recognizes the perfection of her marriage. (35-6)

Luschnig’s analysis concludes in the argument that it is the timing of Alcestis’ death, which would otherwise be only generic and like every other death, not heroic, that fixes her identity as the best and as heroine. This equals the earlier distinction between immortal and mortal, and between outside of time and fixed in time. It is because Alcestis is mortal and fixed in time that her life can be so valuable that the sacrifice of it lifts her and her marriage to a heroic and perfect status.

However, this image of Alcestis willingly dying to set her identity as a heroic, perfect wife is not what the *Alcestis* primarily focuses on. Alcestis does actively choose this fate, but not as a “possible compensation for the inevitability of death” (Garner 65). She describes herself as “unhappiest of women” (*Alc.* 264-5) and calls out that she leaves them “all unwilling” (389). Although her death does mean that it will heighten, and even perfect, the image of her identity and her marriage, the play does not show the illusion of a heroine sacrificing herself happily in order for that to happen. Death will always be a tragic event. The other characters continuously discuss her future glory – “Let her know then that she will die glorious and the noblest woman by far under the sun” (150-1), sings the Chorus. Alcestis lays out her own motivations in her speech: “I refused to live torn from your side with orphaned children” (287-8). She does the opposite of Admetus. She recognizes that, though life is sweet, if Admetus were to die, she would spend the rest of her life unhappy, even though she “could have married the Thessalian of [her] choice and lived in wealth in a royal house” (258-86). Although Pheres states that this makes her senseless (728) and he would surely advise her to live the one life she got to its fullest, it is the choice she makes and the choice Admetus did not make. While the play does not exclude the possibility of Alcestis imagining a kind of future glory, especially because she states, “You, my husband, have the right to boast of wives, and you, my children, of the best of mothers” (323-5), the argument here is that it is not her primary or sole reason for her sacrifice. The choice she makes is based on timing: she would rather die now, having lived a happy life as the best wife and the best mother, than postpone her death (as Admetus does) and live unhappily without her husband and with orphaned children. She states conditions for her sacrifice which she regards not as “the return [her] act deserves (for nothing is more precious than life), but for what is right” (300-2). Because “one who is dead is nothing” (381), there is no reason for excess, as Heracles already argued. Alcestis asks Admetus to be the mother to their children in her place and not to bring a stepmother into their home. Nowhere does she ask for more than this. Her conditions also further the concept of replaceability, which was already introduced by Death – because, to mortals, one human is different to another, she does not want to be replaced, as this would generalize her sacrifice. She does not wish for Admetus to return her act, because that would defeat the purpose of her actions – “My death in your place is enough.” (383) – and wishes her children joy in life: “my children, joy be yours as you look to the light of the sun!” (271) This last wish is not unlike Heracles’ advice: to live and to die are two separate things and, as long as you are still alive, “regard this day’s life as yours but all else as Fortune’s!” (788-9) However, Admetus ignores this advice later in the play and does the exact opposite: “I take no joy in looking on the light or walking about on the earth. Such is the hostage Death took from me and handed over to Hades.” (868-71) This is his attempt to not let Alcestis’ death be generalized – her death must mean something or his father was right in saying that she is replaceable: “Woo many wives so that more may die!” (720). Luschnig further compares the marriage of Alcestis and Admetus to the one of Penelope and Odysseus, stating that, “like the *Odyssey*, the *Alcestis* is concerned with re-establishing the house of the king, with filling the vacuum caused by the loss of a member vital to its continuation” (3). The parallel with Odysseus can be taken further, since Alcestis recognizes that the postponement of death is not necessarily a good thing, like Odysseus rejects the opportunity of mortality because he values his mortal life more; Calypso offers him immortality if he stays on her island, free from the suffering that lies in his future, but Odysseus still chooses to return to his home and to Penelope - “She is a human; you are deathless, ageless. But even so, I want to go back home” (*Od.*, 5.218-20). As a more central character than Heracles and Pheres, Alcestis further contrasts Admetus’ perspective on living and dying. As opposed to Admetus, Alcestis is fixed in time – so far so that she sacrifices herself and becomes a heroine by choosing the right time to die. By sacrificing herself, she is able to heighten the status of her death – to the level of the Homeric heroes Patroclus and Hector – and she gives her husband and children the opportunity to live a longer, happy life. The only aspect that threatens her sacrifice, which she wittingly prevents through the conditions she sets, is her replaceability.

# Death as a Problem to be Solved: the (Ir)replaceability of Mankind

Through the ghostly presence of Asclepius in the play, the *Alcestis* brings up the question whether or not Death can ever be truly averted. From the beginning of the play the *Alcestis* illustrates a division between a world in which Asclepius lives and after. This world is imagined, of course, and it reinforces the most significant boundary between mortals and gods: mortality. This is already introduced in the first part, as long expository prologues often “preview important themes” (Gibert 50), and it has influenced how Admetus circumvented his immediate death. Asclepius is killed by Zeus and, out of anger, Apollo kills “the Cyclopes who forged Zeus’ fire” (*Alc.* 5-6). Because Zeus now punishes Apollo by sending him as a herdsman to Pherai, he meets Admetus, whom he calls “a godly man” (10). He does the same as what Asclepius was punished for: he cheats Death. Further on in the play, the chorus reinforces this division: “only Phoebus’ son, if he still looked upon the light of the sun, would cause her to leave behind the gloomy realm and the portals of Hades … But now what hope can I still cherish that she will live?” (121-30) While a world in which Asclepius was not punished would have allowed Alcestis to find a way to escape death[[2]](#footnote-2), the characters in the world in which the play actually takes place are faced with the brutality of humankind’s mortality. Padilla explains the importance of Asclepius as follows:

In anthropological terms, what Asclepius had effectively accomplished was the widening of a sphere of exchange to allow an inferior social group (mortals) to attain a possession (immortality) that had hitherto been restricted to, and controlled by, a superior group (gods). (187)

However, Asclepius was punished and thus failed to break the boundaries between gods and mortals, constricting the ‘gift-giving’ of resurrection to the sphere of the gods, again. It is this restriction to the sphere of mortality that makes a human, human. As previously argued, Admetus views his death as a problem that can be (at least theoretically) solved by, for example, Pheres dying in his (or Alcestis’) place. However, Death opposes this via his discussion with Apollo, stating that not even money can buy people a longer life. Death is not a problem to be solved, it is something that happens to every mortal, even if they do not know when that moment will come. The chorus knows and has accepted this, Alcestis knows and has accepted this, even Heracles and Pheres. Their vision on life and death fits the world in which the play takes place, but Admetus’ vision does not. The result of his illusion of godliness is a fatal mistake in the beginning of the play: when he is still a king with the best of wives and two healthy children – “a man … whose fall into misery is not due to vice and depravity, but rather to some error, a man who enjoys prosperity and a high reputation” (Aristotle 73) – he lets Alcestis sacrifice herself, with the expectation of finding another solution now that he is still alive and able to do so. However, there is no other solution. That is why Admetus only realizes the true gravity of Alcestis’ death and his fatal mistake when he realizes that there is really nobody who is going to save her – not Asclepius, not Apollo, not Pheres; “Yes, he weeps, holding his beloved wife in his arms, and he begs her not to abandon him, asking for the impossible.” (*Alc.* 201-3) Admetus has placed himself out of the possibility of dying – he does not even consider himself dying as a solution until after the conversation with Pheres – and he places himself out of time. However, “time is to live. He still sees his wife as bound by time, but himself as stuck in a timeless non-being” (Luschnig 76). He regards his death, which has turned into Alcestis’ death, as something they did not deserve: “The sun god sees you and me, two unfortunates, who have done nothing to the gods to deserve your death” (*Alc.* 246-7). Does this imply that death is ever deserved or is it merely a symptom of Admetus’ imagined, godly non-being, in which death is the exception? As Heracles and the chorus state, “death is a debt all mortals must pay” (782). Where the other characters have accepted this and are able to start grieving her appropriately, imagining her nobility and future glory, Admetus is so stuck in a fantasy world that he is not able to do so until he has lost Alcestis. The maidservant has already foreseen this in the beginning of the play: “My master will not know his loss until it happens.” (145) Indeed, it is after Alcestis’ death that he is put back in time, through realizing that Alcestis’ death in itself is generic, like every other mortal’s death.

Before Pheres’ scene, in which he generalizes Alcestis’ death and sacrifice by opening up the possibility of a repetition of events by other wives, the chorus has also already tried to relativize her death: “Admetus, you must endure this misfortune. For you are not the first or last of mortals to lose a noble wife. Know that death is a debt we must all pay.” (416-9) The chorus puts Alcestis’ death back into time: death has happened many times before and it will happen many times again, for all of us, even to noble wives. The significance of this must not be underestimated. Admetus is confronted with a death that was supposed to be his and he realizes that it is not unique, but generic. As Alcestis could have been replaced with other wives, Admetus could have been replaced by another husband for Alcestis – she “could have married the Thessalian of [her] choice and lived in wealth in a royal house” (258-86). Here, the play confronts its audience not only with the mortality of humankind, but also with its replaceability. However, the chorus does make a distinction between the (generic) death of Alcestis and her sacrifice. While Admetus is put back into time, Alcestis is mythologized: “Poets shall sing often in your praise … Such is the theme for song that you have left for poets by your death.” (445-54) In this mythologization, emphasis is placed on the sacrificial element of her death, not her death itself: “For you, you alone, dear among women, had the courage to redeem your husband from Hades at the price of your life.” (460-3) Her death is not imagined as if it does not matter, for Admetus is not criticized by the chorus for his grieving, but for excessive grieving, a parallel with Heracles’ criticism: “But you set no limit upon grief. It is grievous to bear, but still bear it: you are not the first to lose a wife” (891-4). Through the play, then, Admetus realizes that, although Apollo regards him as a godly man and he is saved from immediate death, death is not something that mortals can completely avert. The *Alcestis* points out that death is nothing special – it is not how long your life lasts that is important, but what you do with the one, short life you have. Where Admetus does not object to being saved from immediate death in the beginning of the play, in his conversation with Pheres, he regards immortality as a curse and, slowly, realizes that he is being hypocritical when he says to his father: “It seems that old men, who find fault with age and length of years, pray for death insincerely. For once death comes near, none of them wishes to die, and age is no longer burdensome to them.” (669-72) Because, he now really understands, a longer life does not equal a happier life:

I think my wife’s lot is happier than my own, though it may not appear so. For she will never be touched by any grief and has ended her many troubles with glory. But I, who ought not to be alive and have escaped my fate, shall now live out my life in pain. Now I understand … What profit, then, my friends, for me in living since both my reputation and my fortunes are so ill? (935-61)

Where his fatal mistake was thinking that death was a problem that can be solved by him, a mortal man, the realization after her death that Alcestis’ death is not something he can solve, may be considered what Aristotle names the peripeteia (70). As a result of this realization, he is plunged into deep despair and does everything in his power to not let Alcestis’ death go generalized, though of course the death itself is by nature generic: everyone dies. Although this is still not what the other characters advise him to do, in his panicked state, he vouches to remain unmarried and to banish all the joys from his life. To him, Alcestis cannot be replaced and, as Alcestis had already stated vice versa, a life without her means an unhappy life. Like other mortals from Greek literature, his cheating of death has not ended well: Sisyphus cheated Death and was punished by Zeus for eternity. Orpheus failed to bring Eurydice back by breaking Hades’ one rule and, not unlike Admetus, was “plunged into an even deeper grief than before” (Johnston 19). Faced with the fact that he is unable to solve the ‘problem’ of Alcestis’ death, he is also faced with the replaceability of man: as his father points out, he can just take another woman to keep him alive forever. However, when Alcestis dies, he realizes that she is irreplaceable to him – he is not some kind of godly non-being to whom it does not matter whether one human dies or another. To him, Alcestis is not just some human, but the joy of his life.

# Admetus’ Hospitability and the Resurrection of Alcestis

Now it is established Admetus has been confronted with the inevitability of human mortality after the loss of his wife, it is important to look how this relates to Alcestis’ resurrection. Through her resurrection, Heracles not only brings Alcestis back to life, he also turns Admetus’ deep grief back into joy. Sarah Iles-Johnston distinguishes three types of resurrection in ancient Greek literature:

those in which the return of the dead is wholly successful (Alcestis, Pelops, Iolaus); those in which the return of the dead is successful but those who initiate it are punished by the gods (Sisyphus and Asclepius); and those in which the dead fail to fully return and it is the failure itself that has dire consequences for those who initiate it (Orpheus and Laodamia). (23-4)

All three types have in common that the gods have to bestow the favour on mortals and that mortals cannot conquer death by themselves, a theme very much present in the *Alcestis* – they are punished when doing so without the aid of the gods. What is notable in these three types is that the act of resurrection itself is not unimaginable: “it is a special dispensation that a god might bestow, or that a particularly clever mortal might devise” (24). The resurrection turns into a problem, however, when the god is angered or the limitation(s) that are set by the gods are overstepped**.** It is tempting to regard the resurrection of Alcestis as a gift that is bestowed on her as a result of her heroism, but, given the fact that Heracles is the one in the play that decides to bestow the gift upon her, that is not the case. Furthermore, Heracles never directly speaks to her. He states his reason for the decision to restore her to the house of Admetus: “I must save the woman who has just died and show my gratitude to Admetus” (*Alc.* 840-1). Not because of her heroism, even if the people around her do think of her as heroic, but because of Admetus’ ‘godly qualities’. In this aspect, Heracles’ reason to save Alcestis parallels Apollo’s reason to save Admetus. The latter, as stated earlier, sees in Admetus “a godly man” (10) and, following his immortal logic, saves him from immediate death because of it. Here resurrection *is* bestowed by a god, whereas Alcestis’ resurrection was not carried out by a god, but Heracles. Apollo created the problem, but Heracles solves it, as is possible by (partly) divine beings. Heracles’ reason presses Admetus’ hospitability and ascribes his earlier deception to a character of nobility: “In his nobility he concealed it, out of respect for me. … Therefore he must never be able to say that in his nobility he has done a kindness to a man who is ungrateful” (857, 859-60). The theme of hospitability also returns in the closing scene, in which Heracles asks Admetus to take in a woman, of whom Admetus does not yet know that she is Alcestis.

In the scene where Heracles brings Alcestis back to Admetus, Admetus has been through the realization that death is not a problem that can be solved, that he does not stand above death as some godly non-being and that a prolonged life is not necessarily a gift – he has learned from Pheres, Heracles and the supporting characters. In the closing scene, the roles of Heracles and Admetus are reversed, since it is now Heracles who deceives Admetus and Admetus who begs Heracles to take the woman elsewhere. Besides being burdened by excessive grief, he fears that other people will say that he has betrayed the memory of his wife and he stresses that he wants to honour her, because she deserves it (1057-61). Heracles expresses his wish to bring her back, but Admetus now realizes that such a wish is not able to change things, for “it is not possible for the dead to come back to the light” (1076). This is an explicit reversal of his earlier perspective on death. Heracles tests him once more, stating that excessive grief does nothing and he should bear his “sorrow moderately” (1077). He asks, “But what good will you accomplish if you lament forever?” (1079) Nothing, admits Admetus, but it does not erase his grief. Time heals, he states, “if by time you mean death” (1086) – once more, he wishes to die. Though Heracles insists, Admetus wants to stay faithful to his wife and does not want to take the woman into the house. At last, he says to his servants: “Take her in, since I must receive her into my house.” (1110) Once again, his hospitability causes his fortune, though Admetus clearly states: “you compel me to do this against my will” (1116)[[3]](#footnote-3). Heracles commands him to touch her and to look at her. When he does and sees Alcestis, Heracles further presses: “take her in. Continue, Admetus, to show your guests the piety of a righteous man.” (1147-8) Where Apollo sees Admetus as someone godly who, incidentally, is also a man, Heracles sees Admetus primarily as a man who also possesses godly qualities. After the reunion, Heracles leaves and Admetus stops grieving – now his wife has returned and he embraces once again all the joys he has erased from his life: “let there be dance and song in honour of these happy events” (1155-6). Admetus stated in the beginning: “Someone who is doomed to die is dead, has died and is no more.” (526) During the play, he has decided that he is better off dead and that he shall remain the rest of his life without the joys that a living person should welcome into their life. At the end of the play, the situation is not only restored by Alcestis’ resurrection, but also by Admetus’ (figurative) resurrection: after Alcestis’ return, he is no longer walking around as a self-proclaimed living corpse. In all of these events, the play also highlights the role of fate, fortune and chance. Mortals do not have access to the world of the gods – as Heracles states, “Being mortal we ought to think mortal thoughts.” (799) The audience of the *Alcestis* has access to this world, but the characters, who are as fixed in the fictional world as we are in our real world, do not have any insight into this. Mortals will never be able to understand or predict what might happen next and “one must endure what the god gives, whatever it is” (1070-1). The absence of explicit explanations in the play, like the original reason for Admetus’ fate, (coincidentally) mirrors the nature of humankind: there is no point in thinking about what could have been or what will be – the only thing a human is able to control, is how they react to whatever the divine powers have in store for them. Had it not been for the hospitability and nobility of Admetus in the midst of a crisis, the play would not have ended as happily as it does.

# Conclusion

Admetus starts off as a man unschooled in the troubles of life. He has the perfect marriage, the best wife, two living and healthy children and is favoured by the god Apollo for his godly qualities, who saves him from immediate death. In the *Alcestis* he becomes a man who is, seemingly for the first time, faced with a death close and personal. He is unprepared to face loss and the confronting fact that every mortal dies and that nobody can be saved from all of the suffering that comes with human experience. Out of his delusion and inability to cope, he treats death like a problem to be solved, as if he (and Alcestis) are not fixed in time – which is not the case. He scolds his father for not sacrificing his life and dying an honourable death, frantically wishing an old man (who, to Admetus, is as good as dead anyway) to be the solution to his existential problem. His conversation with Heracles highlights that he holds a peculiar distinction between life and death: if you know you are going to die, you are already as good as dead – ignoring the fact that every mortal is going to die, since mortals are not gods. The way he copes in the end is to erase all joys from his life, though he is heavily criticized for this excessive grieving by the chorus, Pheres and Heracles. Just because it has not happened to Admetus before, does not mean he is the first to have lost a noble wife. Whereas gods are singular and irreplaceable, as they are not born and do not die, humanity is like a river: the humans, like water, rush by, come and go, though the river itself stays. The replaceability of humans in the grand scheme of things, especially Alcestis, is yet another harsh reality Admetus is faced with. After Alcestis’ death, he realizes that death is not a problem to be solved and that the prolongation of his life is no gift when there is no joy left in it. At the end of the play, he realizes that Alcestis is irreplaceable to him and, with her resurrection, he invites joy back into his life: his ‘schooling’ is completed. Although it may seem that Heracles halts or even reverses Admetus’ journey and lesson, the resurrection is actually a restoration of all the characters to the sphere of mortals: “When Admetus regains his wife from death, it is after he has come to recognize, experientially, these conditions of mortality. Their future together will run its course in the shadow of expected, normal death.” (Segal 157)[[4]](#footnote-4). In this sense, it is not only Admetus who is brought back to the level of mortals, Alcestis, too, is brought down from her heroic level. Furthermore, the play does not completely revert to the state of the beginning – Admetus has now faced these harsh realities and this has transformed his vision on life: “the new life we have now taken on is better than the old.” (1157) Through the journey of Admetus, the *Alcestis* teaches its audience that it is important to realize that a mortal has no agency over life and death and to accept this by living your life (piously), instead of grieving it before death has even come. Indeed, “there are many shapes of divinity, and many things the gods accomplish against our expectation” (1159-60); a lesson that can help us get through many confronting, unprecedented times in our own lives.

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1. Visvardi further offers an interesting discussion of these elements and their places in the genres of both satyr-play and tragedy in the fifth century. Other scholars discuss the play’s relation to the epic and epinician genre; see Garner (58-71), Padilla (184). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Perhaps this can also be interpreted as a comment on the ability of medicine to heal sickness and its inability to prevent death. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Whether or not Admetus breaks his promise to Alcestis is much debated. Segal argues that he does after realizing the expectations of him as king and father (146-7); Padilla adds that his strong reluctance is a great enough indication of his “growth in understanding a moral dimension of *philia*” (204); Luschnig states that “only by appearing to be somebody else can she make herself not only appreciated but even *known*” (10). Because he only takes her in (personally, not in the hands of servants) after the recognition, I would argue that he does not break his promise to Alcestis. The actions prior to the recognition can be ascribed to his strong feeling of duty towards his guest-friend, mirroring his first deception of Heracles by not disclosing Alcestis’ death to him. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Visvardi also shares the view that the resurrection is a restoration of mortal attributes: “With the traditional attributes of death – unpredictability, inevitability, irreversibility – suspended, all qualitative distinctions in life are lost: the present as known and the future as unknown merge together … As a restorer of differences then, Heracles brings back the distinctions that render life worth living.” (69) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)