

## THE BEGINNING OF EURIPIDES' *ALCESTIS*

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It is a common conviction that Apollo, in Euripides' *Alcestis*, enters the stage from the gate of the palace of Admetus, with his usual paraphernalia: bow, quiver, etc. Wherever stage directions are given, in texts, commentaries or translations, he always enters from the palace-gate. Why? What was he doing in the palace? In full Apollinian array! Were the spectators given to understand that Apollo had divested himself in the palace of the rags he had been wearing as a shepherd, as a θής, a creature of the lowest standing in Greek civilization? Did he become a god again in the palace? Did he there find his bow and arrows, in the wardrobe? Or should we not think about Greek drama in this way?

What is the MS evidence for Apollo's entering the stage from the palace gate? Very scant, to say the least. In two codd., usually called L and P (the Vaticanus 909, date about 1300, and the Palatinus 287 and its copy Laur. 172, 14th cent.), the words appear: Ἐξιῶν ἐκ τοῦ οἴκου τοῦ Ἀδμήτου προλογίζει ὁ Ἀπόλλων ῥητορικῶς, scribbled under the list of dramatis personae. We do not know when, nor by whom, they were written. In her admirable commentary on the *Alcestis* Mrs. Dale, quoting the Greek words above, continues (after a comma): 'comments the Scholiast, making a fair deduction from the first speech: Apollo "enters" (ἐξιέναι is, given the Greek stage-set, the normal word for the "entry" of a player; cf. Ar. *Ranae* 946) and "opens the play on a rhetorical note"—he begins, not with a bald ἦκω Διὸς παῖς, but with a (grammatically) floating apostrophe full of feeling.' So far Mrs. Dale. I think she is right in assuming that the words are a 'fair deduction' from Apollo's speech, but by whom? If by Dicaearchus, its worth would be considerable. If not, what? A deduction is a deduction, not a tradition. It has to be admitted that any casual reader who starts on the *Alcestis* will assume without ado that Apollo was in the house, and that he is now coming out of the building. The words are there, in v. 1 and v. 23. Such a reader will readily believe that the god is addressing the house in a speech 'full of feeling'. Now, for many, many years I have believed so myself. I believed so at school because my teachers taught me so, I believed so at the university of Amsterdam because my professors taught me so, and I went on believing so while teaching myself. But then, gradually, especially since I have several times produced the play with my pupils, my opinion changed. The *Alcestis* is not a 'pleasant' play 'full of feeling'; it is not a fairy tale, although the play is of course based on fairy tales; but Euripides handles these elements with biting sarcasm and irony, and in a very witty way. Socrates (and Sophocles) would have liked the play. And Aristophanes who time and again made fun of the *Telephus* (the play immediately preceding the *Alcestis* on the day of the performance) never directed his shafts at the *Alcestis*, although it should be kept in mind that in 438 BC, the date of performance of the *Alcestis*, Aristophanes was a boy of six years. Apparently he had been reading the *Telephus* and many other plays of Euripides in later times, but we are not sure

whether the *Alcestis*, being a substitute for a satyr-play, was as readily available in writing as were other texts.

The first thing one should obtain to understand the *Alcestis* is information found nowhere in the voluminous literature on the *Alcestis*. What was the current opinion about Thessalians at the time Euripides wrote this play? Still, a wealth of information is immediately at hand in Pape-Benseler, *Griechische Eigennamen*, s.v. Θεσσαλός (my edition is from 1863). They were considered to be cowards and cads, mean, cheating, avaricious and gluttonous. A good example of what a Thessalian was in Athenian eyes, is Meno, of *Anabasis* fame. That was the reason for Plato's choice of this interesting personage for the dialogue of that name, a dialogue *περὶ ἀρετῆς*! Plato provides more information in his *Crito*. There (at 53 D) the Laws, speaking to Socrates, first mention a few more or less decent cities and then continue: ἀλλ' ἐκ μὲν τούτων τῶν τόπων ἀπαρεῖς, ἤξεις δὲ εἰς Θετταλίαν παρὰ τοὺς ξένους τοὺς Κρίτωνος· ἐκεῖ γὰρ δὴ πλείστη ἀταξία καὶ ἀκολασία, καὶ ἴσως ἂν ἡδέως σου ἀκούοιεν, ὡς γελοῖως ἐκ τοῦ δεσμοτηρίου ἀπεδίδρασκες σκευὴν τέ τινα περιθέμενος, ἢ διφθέραν λαβὼν ἢ ἄλλα οἷα δὴ εἰώθασιν ἐνσκευάζεσθαι οἱ ἀποδιδράσκοντες etc. In short: it is there, in Thessaly, that the utmost lawlessness and intemperance prevail. That is what the Laws tell Socrates. If that could be said about the Thessalians at the time the *Crito* was written, it is valid a fortiori for an author nearer to Tanagra and to the Persian wars to do likewise.

This Thessaly offered an excellent climate to Heracles. Therefore he should not be played as being a wee bit tipsy (as suggested in many commentaries and translations) but dead drunk, yet still . . . a hero! The music suited to vv. 747–772 and issuing from the 'guestroom' of Admetus' house, where Heracles is carousing, could be similar to the German drinking-songs:

. . . und wir versaufen unsrer Grossma  
ihr klein Häuschen, ihr klein Häuschen etc.  
und die erste und die zweite Hypothek!

or:

O mein lieber Augustin etc.

For Apollo, however, Thessaly is not a suitable climate, nor is Apollo a suitable playmate for Admetus. Schubert would not feel happy with the Rolling Stones.

These are a few of the reasons why I firmly believe that in v. 10 Euripides is at his very best as an ironical poet. Likewise in v. 23.: should we really understand those words as meaning that Apollo is so greatly charmed with Admetus' house? It is the superficial meaning, of course. But how these words will be understood by the audience depends entirely on the way they are spoken and on the mimicry of the actor. And the spectators knew their Thessalians very well!

But—so we read in our commentaries—these Thessalians like Admetus were 'grands seigneurs' and very hospitable. Yes, they warmly praised hospitality, but . . . hospitality of the kind that pays! That should be taken into account in order to

understand vv. 481–507, and after that 551 sqq. where the chorus obviously do not at all understand Admetus' hospitality towards Heracles. And Admetus' reply to them (559–560),

Αὐτὸς δ' ἀρίστου τοῦδε τυγχάνω ξένου,  
ὅταν ποτ' Ἄργους διψίαν ἔλθω χθόνα,

meaning 'well yes, you see, it pays, my hospitality!', carries no conviction with them at all, for they go on asking:

πῶς οὖν ἔκρυπτες τὸν παρόντα δαίμονα,  
φίλου μολόντος ἀνδρός, ὡς αὐτὸς λέγεις;

Then Admetus' final reply follows:

οὐκ ἄν ποτ' ἠθέλησεν εἰσελθεῖν δόμους,  
εἰ τῶν ἐμῶν τι πημάτων ἐγνώρισε.

And most remarkable is the suddenly changing attitude of the chorus in vv. 568 sqq., the same kind of pathos that Admetus had been displaying at vv. 328 sqq. in answer to Alcestis' requests. They have been somewhat slow in understanding, but they now grasp the situation: yes, it pays, this hospitality. Alcestis may be dead, and her corpse still in the house, promises in abundance have been solemnly made, but of course: Heracles should be received, and treated in a way becoming a hero. And so far does this magnificent hospitality go that Admetus utters the terrible words (548 sqq.):

'. . . and shut the doors,  
it is not right that guests while feasting  
should hear wailings and be vexed.'

That Thessalians were Greeks could not be denied, but in general they were counted as vicious scoundrels.

At the time Euripides was writing the *Alcestis* the popularity of Thessalians must have been at its lowest ebb. They had refused to fight the Persians, although that was long ago. But when the *Alcestis* was played it was still fresh in the memory of the Athenians that at the battle of Tanagra (against the Spartans) the Thessalians, although allies of Athens, had suddenly during the battle deserted to the other side (Thuc. 1.107.7). This battle of Tanagra remained an open wound in the Athenian soul. In Olympia the Spartans had hung a golden shield in the temple of Zeus to proclaim their victory (Paus. 5.10.4) and, worst of all, the Thessalians had a monument in Delphi to commemorate their 'victory' (*BCH* 82, 1958, 329 ff.)—to the chagrin of the Athenians.

Most of the foregoing has been dealt with in the introduction to my Dutch translation of the *Alcestis* (Buijten & Schipperheijn, Amsterdam 1967). I am now coming to the main subject of this article: the beginning of the *Alcestis*. While I was preparing to produce the play for the centennial celebration of the Schiedam

Gymnasium in 1979 I became aware that something was amiss in the conventional interpretation of the first lines.

As a matter of fact it was Mrs. Dale, in her admirable commentary on the *Alcestis* (Oxford, 2nd ed. 1961), who was the first to notice that in v. 9 ἐς τόδ' ἡμέρας is not the same as ἐς τήνδ' ἡμέραν, and that in *Phoen.* 1085 and *Soph. O.C.* 1138 the sense required is not 'to this day', but that it should be taken more narrowly: 'to this hour', as it were. Yet translators still persist in translating 'to this day'. Unfortunately Mrs. Dale did not adequately pursue her acute observation.

To start with I would propose to translate not 'to this hour' but 'to this moment'. The idiom is not of frequent occurrence. But the new translation has considerable implications. Let us first have a look at *Phoen.* 425, the dialogue between Iocasta and her son Polynices during the latter's short visit from the battlefield, while the battle still rages. She inquires about his marriage:

ἄρ' εὐτυχεῖς οὖν τοῖς γάμοις ἢ δυστυχεῖς;

Polynices answers (somewhat drily):

οὐ μεμπτός ἡμῖν ὁ γάμος εἰς τόδ' ἡμέρας.

Obviously his only answer can be 'to this moment', because the very next moment he has to leave Thebes again and may be killed in the fray. The same applies to *Phoen.* 1085. There Iocasta is asking the herald, who brings the news that the Thebans have held their positions and that the Argives are doing less well:

ἐν εἰπέ πρὸς θεῶν, εἰ τι Πολυνείκους πέρι  
οἴσθ' ὥς μέλει μοι καὶ τόδ', εἰ λείψσει φάος.

Well, he cannot guarantee anything but the previous moment he was outside the walls while the battle was raging. So his answer is: ἕη σοι ξυνωρίς ἐς τόδ' ἡμέρας τέκνων, meaning of course: 'up to this moment your two sons are alive', yet thinking at the same time 'but the very next moment they may be dead, for all I know', as in fact they will be. More examples could be quoted, but these will suffice.

Why then is it so important to stress the meaning of 'moment' in v. 9? I would suggest that till that moment Apollo is still the hired labourer, the 'thēs', suffering the punishment dealt out to him by Zeus, and immediately afterwards he is again himself, the god Apollo. The 'moment' is the moment of metamorphosis.

The 'fair discussion' mentioned in Mrs. Dale's commentary also included the bow. But can Thanatos' mention of the bow v. 39 be regarded as sufficient evidence for a bow in Apollo's hand in v. 1?

A.S. Way in the Loeb edition translates the first lines (Apollo speaking):

Halls of Admetus, hail! I stooped my pride  
here to brook fare of serfs, yea I, a God!

Wilamowitz (1910) starts his translation in this way: 'Der Hintergrund stellt das Haus des Admetos in Pherai dar; ausser der grossen Mittelthür hat es noch eine

kleinere. Vor dem Hause eine Anzahl Altäre.

APOLLON

*in langem, schleppendem Gewande, eine lange Wollbinde in dem wallenden Haupthaar, den Bogen in der Linken, einen Lorbeerzweig in der Rechten, tritt aus dem Hause hervor.*

Haus des Admetos, meinen Scheidegruss  
ruf ich dir heute. Meine Götterwürde  
hat am Gesindetische hier zu sitzen  
sich nicht gescheut. Zeus hatt' es so gewollt.'

This is all very charming and decent, very 'höfisch' and dramatic, but is it Euripides? Wieland had been making similar mistakes in judging Euripides, but in a contrary direction: he complained about missing 'Gefühl' in Euripides.

The first thing necessary for an understanding of the *Alcestis* prologue is to have a look at the Athenian public of the year 438. They have seen three tragedies (*The Cretan Women*, *Alcmeon in Psophis* and . . . the *Telephus*); now they are expecting the satyr-play. That could be anything except another tragedy. What would have happened if Apollo, their well-known Apollo, nay more, Euripides' well-known Apollo, had entered in a long white draggle-tailed robe, with a woollen headband, with bow and quiver, and a laurel branch in his right hand? They certainly would have been stupefied, but I am afraid that after the first words they would have hissed him off the stage.

Are there any other possibilities? I think so. Apollo does not enter from the palace gate at all. Being a 'thēs', a hired labourer, according to Greek conceptions the lowest creature on earth (as witness Homer *Od.* 18.357, or rather the *Nekuia*, 11.489, where Odysseus enters from the country), he emerges from the left side of the stage as seen by the spectators. He enters running and, instead of being dressed in a long white robe, he is in rags, and in a snarling voice he addresses the palace and shakes his fist. But it may be urged that Apollo and Admetus are friends, extremely good friends! The poet Rhianos goes so far as to make lovers of them. But that is much later. Decadence has a sweet tooth. Euripides has not. His Apollo hates Admetus. Would it not have been a bit surprising if Father Zeus, when he wanted to punish Apollo, had sent him to a sympathetic host, a most hospitable Admetus?

When reading the first two lines:

᾿Ω δώματ' Ἀδμήτει', ἐν οἷς ἔτλην ἐγὼ  
θῆσαν τράπεζαν αἰνέσαι θεός περ ὦν

it should be clear that Euripides has introduced tremendous tension. It will be a rather difficult task to explain this passage, but let us try.

To begin with, the word ὦ (or ὦ̄) has to be explained. Of course some readers may be a bit surprised, but I am afraid I shall hear the reproof that I am exaggerating, that ὦ is a mere nothing, that it means no more than that somebody

or something is being addressed. Well, let me simplify the problem: we are not going to bother about ὦ or ὦ̄ for the simple reason that Euripides did not use accents and breathings: they had not yet been invented. But I maintain that ὦ can be snarled in such a way

... ὥστε πάντας ὀρθίας  
 στῆσαι φόβῳ δείσαντες ἐξαίφνης τρίχας.  
 καλεῖ γὰρ αὐτὸν πολλὰ πολλαχῆ θεός·  
 ὦ οὔτος οὔτος, Οἰδίπους, τί μέλλομεν  
 χωρεῖν; (Soph. *O.C.* 1627)

... that the hair of all  
 stood up on their heads for sudden fear,  
 and they were afraid. For the god called him with many  
 callings and manifold: ‘Oedipus, Oedipus, why delay  
 we to go? Thou tarriest too long.’ (Jebb)

Much more could be said about the little and much neglected word ὦ, but we shall now leave it at what has been said.

The second word δώματα is of course ‘house’, and δώματ’ Ἀδμήτεια means ‘Admetus’ house’. But that is not all. For the superficial reader the next words ἐν οἷς at once imply that Apollo *was* in the house, and that he now emerges from it. Thereupon we meet the dramatic sequence

... ἔτλην ἐγὼ  
 θῆσαν τράπεζαν αἰνέσαι θεός περ ὦν.

It is extremely difficult to render the full meaning of ἔτλην in English (or in any other language I know). It more or less means ‘to perform an enormous and painful task to its bitter end’. The root of the word is the same as in ‘Atlas’. It is important not to forget that connection. It is succeeded by the strongly stressed ἐγὼ, followed immediately in the next line—in a striking contrast—by θῆσαν τράπεζαν αἰνέσαι θεός περ ὦν.

In the next 4 lines Apollo gives a very brief exposition of the plot, so very short that he contracts the ‘sons of the Cyclopes’ into the ‘Cyclopes’, thereby abbreviating considerably the life of some well-known members of that tribe.

Sons of Cyclopes may admittedly be called ‘Cyclopes’, for all we know. But why this hurried exposition—so very short? It seems to me that Euripides is here representing an Apollo choking with anger because of the humiliation he has suffered, and at the same time in a mood of diabolical mirth because *the* moment has come, *his* moment, the moment of vengeance.

I would suggest that after v. 9 Apollo changes from ‘thēs’ to god. Already during his speech (vv. 1–9) he has been casting off his rags and now is in possession of his godly attributes, the bow and quiver, perhaps a lyre (its tuning by Apollo and the response from a possible musical ensemble is good for a laugh), and perhaps an aureole or whatever else the producer may invent; but from this

famous moment on he can be sure that the public is in the right mood for the play, its ‘satyr-drama’. The οὐδὲν πρὸς Διόνυσον will not be heard!

In the meantime Apollo goes on telling us that he, being ‘pious and pure’ himself, had the good luck to find in Admetus a pious and pure master. It is said in a truly wonderful line, a very fine specimen of Euripidean art:

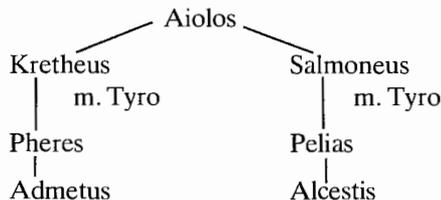
ὁσίου γὰρ ἀνδρὸς ὄσιος, ὦν ἐτύγγανον.

If ever Euripides wrote a line tongue-in-cheek it was this line. Apollo himself is speaking. It is most extraordinary in Greek drama that a god should call himself ὄσιος ‘pious and pure’. I know of no comparable example. Only a Euripidean Apollo could speak this line. Is this Apollo ‘pious and pure’? Or is the Apollo of the *Ion*? And his dear, his o so dear friend Admetus, could he be called ‘pious and pure’? Perhaps after his conversion, after v. 941? Does his admission ‘Now I understand’ guarantee that he is a better man now? The man who has just spoken, the words in vv. 885–888? I have cast about in vain to find a translation that really renders in all its crudity what he has expressed there. Most translations are somewhat cloudy, are trying to tone down the words,—to make it more beautiful perhaps. Here is the text, and my own translation (but in Dutch, with my apologies):

885 παίδων δὲ νόσους καὶ νυμφιδίους  
 εὐνάς θανάτοις κεραιζόμενας  
 οὐ τλητὸν ὄραν, ἔξδὸν ἀτέκνους  
 ἀγάμους τ’εἶναι διὰ παντός.

Maar kind’ren door ziekte en je vrouw door de dood te verliezen, en alles weer kwijt te zijn, dat houdt geen mens uit, als je net zo goed vrijgezel steeds had kunnen blijven.

The only meaning of his ‘I now understand’ is that it is extremely foolish to marry. ‘Admetus war ein milder Herr’, so Wilamowitz (*Gr. Trag.* III<sup>3</sup> (1910) p.73). We bow our head respectfully. In a sense what he says is true, only it has nothing to do with the Euripidean Admetus. His Admetus is a cad and a scoundrel. Even in v. 533, in the famous altercation with Heracles, when he denies the death of his wife, it is a downright lie when he calls the dead woman not a συγγενής, but an ὀθνεῖος. Not only is she his wife, but she is a συγγενής too. Here is the genealogy:



From the lists of his plays we know that Euripides was well aware of this genealogy. He is a great poet and a very great dramatist. Unfortunately he is often praised for qualities he has not (and does not want to have) and blamed for so-called 'defects' he has not at all. In some Dutch and other commentaries *Heracles* in vv. 773 ff. is 'only just a wee-bit . . . tipsy' — notwithstanding vv. 747–773. It is interesting to note that by far the best literary critic of Antiquity, ps. Longinus, in his treatise 'On the Sublime' quotes Aeschylus three times, Sophocles four times and Euripides . . . ten times.

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