

“Existence and Non-Existence are Considered Distinct”:
Heracles, Action, and Fifth-Century Thought in Euripides, *Alcestis*

The character of Heracles in Euripides’s *Alcestis* is rooted in the traditions of the satyr play, known to us from Aeschylus’s *Kerykes*, Sophocles’s *Heracles at Taenarus*, and Euripides’s *Syleus*, and early Greek epic and epinician poetry. In *Alcestis* itself Heracles is often understood as the embodiment of the ἀγών (Garner, 67-71, *inter alios*), the victor whose adversary is death itself (Bradley, 121), and one who responds to the χάρις of Admetus with a greater χάρις (Conacher, 44-7; Padilla, 195-6). Food and drink provide the sustenance behind his exhortation to become wiser (779 σοφώτερος).

With such tokens of admission Heracles enters Euripides’s earliest extant foray into the great literary and philosophical issues of fifth century Athens. Admittedly, the tradition, personality, and the alcoholic consumption of the hero make it initially difficult to take his points seriously as an intellectual argument. Heracles’s first foray into fifth century philosophical argumentation, χωρὶς τό τ’ εἶναι καὶ τὸ μὴ νομίζεται (528), while technically correct, cannot withstand the rhetorical assault of Admetus, who truly makes the weaker argument the stronger in steering him away from the conclusion that it is Admetus's wife who has died. However, inebriated as Heracles may be, his rebuttals of Admetus and the butler go beyond the wisdom of the pub. Heracles’s insistence on the necessity (840 δεῖ) to reestablish Admetus's home (841 τόνδ’ αὔθις ἰδρῦσαι δόμον) by saving Alcestis is a direct response to the arguments of Admetus, Pheres, and the chorus over the nature of necessity, particularly the necessity of death (cf. Lloyd 124-5), and the relative importance of wife, parent, and son to the household. In contradiction to Admetus's remarks to Heracles that the deceased is a "foreigner" (532 ὀθνείος; cf. the butler at 810-11), and by implication a person of no seminal importance, Heracles’s treatment of Alcestis supports Admetus's earlier claims to Pheres about her centrality. As Heracles is a peer of Admetus and not Pheres, despite his much greater life experience, this places him in the same generation intellectually as well as physically (cf. Thury, 203-206).

Likewise, Heracles's bromide that "no one knows what will happen tomorrow" in terms of life or death (783-4) is couched in the philosophical language of the day. He speaks of the nature (780 φύσις) of the discussion; death is a matter of luck, which cannot be taught (786 οὐ διδακτόν) or determined by skill (τέχνη). In this he is closest to the "Ode on Man" in Sophocles's *Antigone* (332-383), regardless of whether *Antigone* is earlier or was also produced in 438 (Lewis, 35-50) and thus only draws on the same ideas.

In the debate of ends versus means, Heracles gives precedence to ends. His acceptance of the butler as a drinking buddy favors social equality, another major issue of the day, but only to a point: Heracles uses the discussion as a way to learn the identity of the deceased. Similarly, Heracles's tussle with Death and his rhetorical ἀγών with Admetus to get him to accept the veiled woman are done with the goal of χάρις.

The words and actions of Heracles also shed light on several other important ideas in the play. His consistency of character enhances our understanding of Euripides's echoes of Simonides's poem 542 PMG, which questions whether one can be a truly good man, given the vicissitudes of life (Dickie, 21-33). Although Euripides's portrayal of Heracles does not show whether virtue can be taught, it does suggest that an already virtuous person can become more so. Finally, this Heracles prefigures the hero of Sophocles's *Philoctetes* in his ability to resolve conflict (cf. Silk, 4, 19). Heracles's final warning about avoiding the envy (φθόνος) of the gods (1135) is not only an epinician theme (Most, 124-141, and Cairns, 235-252 in Konstan and Rutter) but one that echoes the concerns of Euripides about the place of immortals and humans.

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