Satyr Drama, Tragedy, and Comedy in Euripides' *Alcestis*

Almost every scholarly investigation of Euripides' *Alcestis* addresses its "prosatyric" status (for example, Markantonatos 2013: 92 cites 34 studies); however, no satisfactory account of genre in *Alcestis* exists. We are in a quandary – *Alcestis* looks like a tragedy but was staged in the position of satyr drama; conversely, if it is a satyr drama, it lacks a chorus of satyrs, the hallmark of the genre. Rather than positing a putative "prosatyric" genre of which *Alcestis* is the only example, in this paper I expand upon the views of Marshall (2000) and Shaw (2014), who claim that Euripides removed the satyrs from *Alcestis* as an exaggerated response to a decree limiting free speech in comedy ("Decree of Morychides"). Despite this promising account, scholars have been resistant to their explanation (e.g. Lämmle 2015; Konstantakos 2016).

I propose that a satisfactory explanation for the generic interplay in *Alcestis* would account for (1) the conflict of having an apparent tragedy in a satyric position, (2) the lack of attested examples of "prosatyric" dramas other than *Alcestis*, (3) the audience experience over the course of the play, and (4) the comments in the *hypothesis* that *Alcestis* is both "rather comic" and "rather satyric." Marshall and Shaw can successfully explain (1) and (2) by suggesting that Euripides purposefully misinterpreted the law restricting *komoidein* "ridiculing" as restricting "*komos*-songs," and since satyr drama was a form of "*komos*-song," Euripides chose to omit the chorus of satyrs from his fourth position play. Euripides' over-compliance with the decree represents a political protest against limiting artistic free speech and a defense of comedy and drama as a whole.

The motivation for Euripides' defense of comedy can be detected by examining the audience experience through the play's structure, which can be divided into three phases. In Phase 1 (1-76), the context guides the audience into believing they are watching a *satyr drama*.

Instead of a loud chorus of satyrs, Euripides introduces a chorus of old men complaining of the silence, transitioning to Phase 2 (77-746), a section marked by the norms of *tragedy* (Admetus' sorrow, Alcestis' death, and the family's lamentation). In Phase 3 (747-1163) an empty stage transitions to a new portrait of Heracles as an excessively gluttonous drunk, evoking the canonical figure shared by *comedy and satyr drama*. I suggest that the choice to depict Heracles as a gluttonous drunk symbolized the close relationship Euripides felt between comedy and satyr drama by incorporating a character that exemplified the license of both genres. Moreover, Euripides was signaling his commonalities with comedians – just as both wrote *kōmos*-songs about a drunken Heracles, both would be affected by the decree. Thus, the play is constantly transforming in its use of genre, leading to multiple generic affiliations. At first, *Alcestis* evokes an expected satyr drama in Phase 1, then a recalibrated satyr-less tragedy in Phase 2, and finally a blend of tragedy, comedy, and satyr drama with the incorporation of the comic and satyric Heracles in Phase 3.

Understanding *Alcestis* in this way helps explain why the *hypothesis* stated that the play was both "rather comic" *and* "rather satyric." Scholars have not yet noticed that all the *hypothesis*' remarks about genre indicate a *generic change* in the middle of the play. More specifically, the author of the *hypothesis* describes *Alcestis* as tragic, but after a certain point in the play, the drama became more aligned with satyr drama and comedy: "the drama is rather satyric, since it *changes* towards joy and pleasure"; "they *begin* from disaster and *end* with happiness and joy, which is more characteristic of comedy"; "the drama has a rather comic *conclusion*." I argue that these claims correspond to the inclusion of the comic and satyric character of gluttonous and drunken Heracles around the midpoint of the play. The explanation I have provided accounts for the four criteria above: (1) the Decree of Morychides engendered a

response in Euripides to remove the "*kōmos*-songs", i.e. the chorus of satyrs, from his fourth position play *Alcestis*, (2) this type of "prosatyric" response could only have happened between 440-437 BCE while the Decree of Morychides was in effect, (3) the drunken, gluttonous Heracles displayed a shared heritage with comedy as the comic and satyric character *par excellence*, and (4) the intrusion of a "rather comic" and "rather satyric" character underlies the *hypothesis*' claims that a generic change occurred halfway through the play.

Bibliography

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