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


