

Death and the Staging of Euripides' *Alcestis*

Although Euripides' *Alcestis* (438 BCE) has been the subject of several substantial commentaries in recent years (Conacher 1988; Parker 2007), the play's staging has never been given detailed attention. This paper attempts to resolve a generally unrecognized staging problem in *Alcestis* involving the movements of the character Death by means of a new interpretation of one of the most striking if peculiar moments in the action, in the first half of the title character's onstage death-scene.

Alcestis begins with Apollo's entrance from Admetus' house, which he is now abandoning. Shortly thereafter (24) Apollo is joined onstage by Death, who carries a sword with which he intends to shear a lock of Alcestis' hair, consecrating her to the gods of the Underworld (76). At the end of the scene, Death says that he is "going after [Alcestis]", and the obvious interpretation of the stage-action is that he enters Admetus' house, and that Apollo simultaneously exits into the wing. At 843–9, however, Heracles (who has at last realized what the situation is in the house where he has been carousing obliviously) announces that he will visit the graveyard where Alcestis has been buried, in order to confront Death there and force him to give her up; and at 1140–2, after he returns Alcestis to her husband, he claims to have done exactly this.

This creates an intolerable staging problem. The Athenian tragic and comic poets are elsewhere extremely careful about matching exits and entrances: characters who enter a house or a wing and return onstage always return from that same house or wing. If Death enters Admetus' house at 76 and is never seen onstage again, therefore, he cannot suddenly be found at the end of the play in one of the wings at the graveyard.

I suggest that this problem can be resolved by taking literally a series of otherwise extremely odd remarks the dying Alcestis makes onstage at 252–7, 259–63, where she insists that she can not only hear Charon's call, but actually see a winged figure representing death leading her off to the Underworld. No one else onstage can see this figure (259–60), and Alcestis is usually taken to be hallucinating. But this must in fact be Death himself, who emerges from the house to clip her hair, and who must either exit into the wing at this point or, more likely, returns to the house and accompanies the funeral procession off at 740. In either case, Heracles can now reasonably find him at the graveyard shortly thereafter and force him to surrender his victim. For parallel divine figures visible to some but not all character onstage, compare the Furies at the end of Aeschylus' *Choephoroi*, and Athena at the beginning of Sophocles' *Ajax*.

In the course of the paper I will offer a complete catalogue of entrances and exits in *Alcestis*, with comments on costuming and props where appropriate, and a division of parts between the actors. I will also briefly discuss the implications of the fact that *Alcestis* appears to require only two actors for the other ("lost") plays in the tetralogy, and in particular the *Telephus*, about the stage action in which we are reasonably well-informed.