

ALCESTIS

Apollo:

Admetus' house, to you I came to bite
The bread of menial servitude despite
The fact that I'm a god. It had begun
When Lord Zeus killed Asclepius, my son,
His bolt thrust in his chest; so then I slew,
By anger stirred, the Cyclopes, those who
Forged Zeus's fire; Zeus, to punish me,
Forced me to serve in abject slavery
A man. I tended to his cattle here
And to this moment kept his house from fear. 10
I saved this man from death by trickery –
I fooled the Muses once I found that he
Was godlike: they told me he could evade
Hades immediately once he had made
A switch of corpses. But, having gone round
His nearest and his dearest ones, he found
None but his wife prepared to make their way
Below and not look on the light of day
Again. She's now upon the point of death,
Held by her kin before her final breath. 20
She's doomed to die today, but from the stain
Of death I must depart and not remain
Within the house I love so well. I see
That Death is very near and presently
Will carry her away. Her time is nigh
And he has to be there when she must die.

Death:

Phoebus, why are you lingering about

This place? Plotting more injuries, no doubt,

Cutting and ending Hades' claims. Did you

Not do enough denying me my due

30

With that Admetus by bamboozling

The Fates with your cunning maneuvering?

So are you standing guard now with your bow

To free Alcestis who has vowed to go

To Hades in her husband's stead?

Apollo:

Fear not:

My cause is just.

Death:

Why therefore have you got

Your weapons with you?

Apollo:

It is just my way –

I have them with me every single day.

Death:

Oh yes, but also to give unjust aid

To the house.

Apollo:

That's true – I'm grievously dismayed

40

About a friend's ill luck.

Death:

Will you rob me

Of one more corpse?

Apollo:

It was not forcibly

I took the first one from you.

Death:

Why therefore

Is he still living?

Apollo:

That's because of your

Arriving here to fetch his wife.

Death:

And so

I'll take her down below.

Apollo:

Take her. I know

I can't prevail upon you.

Death:

Not to slay

My victims? But I must.

Apollo:

No, to delay

Her journey.

Death:

Now I understand your will.

Apollo:

So is there any way that she might still

50

Grow old?

Death:

Oh no – I love the work I do.

Apollo:

Yet no more than one single soul will you

Receive.

Death:

Well, when the dead are young I gain

More honour.

Apollo:

When she's old, though, she'll obtain

A rich interment.

Death:

But the law that you,

Phoebus, are trying to propose is to

Rich folks' advantage.

Apollo:

What? Have I misread

Your wisdom?

Death:

Yes. Rich people, when they're dead,

Can buy a rich interment.

Apollo:

But you'll not,

I think, grant me this favour?

Death:

You have got

60

That right – you know me.

Apollo:

Oh indeed I do.

Men hate you and the gods rejected you.

Death:

You can't have everything.

Apollo:

You're pitiless,
Nor will you ever cease your hatefulness.
But someone's coming who has been assigned
By Eurystheus to make you change your mind.
He'll fetch the steeds and chariot from Thrace,
That wintry land, and, once he takes his place
As guest here in the house, he forcibly
Will take her. You yourself meticulously 70
Will do what I have asked of you. And yet
You'll get no thanks from me – no, all you'll get
Is hatred. [exit]

Death:

All this talk of yours will gain
You nothing. I have made it very plain –
She'll die. Her hair I'll cut off with my blade,
Because after this sacrifice is made
The victim then becomes the property
Of those who rule in Hell's obscurity.

Semi-Chorus A:

What means this silence?

Semi-Chorus B:

There's no kinsman here
To tell us that the queen is dead and we're 80
To mourn her or to tell us she still sees
The light of day. To everybody she's
The best of wives.

Semi-Chorus A:

Was there a groan, a scream,
Breast-striking – anything that makes it seem

That she is dead?

Semi-Chorus B:

No, not even a slave

Is posted at the gates. O Paian, save

Us all!

Semi-Chorus A:

There would be sounds if she had died.

Her corpse, of course, has not been borne outside

As yet.

Chorus Member A:

I am not sure. What makes you so

Certain of this when I myself don't know?

90

Chorus-Member B:

Admetus would not hold the funeral rite

For his good wife with nobody in sight

To mourn.

Semi-Chorus A:

The lustral basin I don't see

Before the gates, though it is usually

Placed where the dead once lived. No lock of hair

Cut from the lady's head is anywhere

Upon the porch. Nor do I hear the sound

Of any women-mourners as they pound

Their breasts.

Semi-Chorus B:

And yet this is the very day

She's meant to...

Semi-Chorus A:

What is this you mean to say?

100

Semi-Chorus B:

She has to die.

Semi-Chorus A:

You've crushed me powerfully.

Semi-Chorus A:

When the high-born are in adversity,

Those who've been thought as virtuous since birth

Must mourn them.

Chorus:

There is nowhere here on earth,

Not Lycia, not Egyptian Ammon, where

One may dispatch a ship whereby to spare

This wretched queen. Relentless death draws near

And there's no shrine that I may reach, I fear.

Asclepius would be the only one,

If he yet looked upon the light of the sun, 110

To bring her from the gloomy underworld;

For he, until that lightning goad was hurled

At him and overcame him, raised the dead.

And now what hope have I that she'll be led

Back to the light of day? But who comes here?

One of the servants, shedding many a tear.

What news, I wonder, will she bring? [to the servant] You'd be

Allowed to grieve if some calamity

Has overwhelmed your master. Is the queen

Yet breathing on the earth or has she been 120

Subdued by death?

Servant:

Well, you might call her dead

And also living.

Chorus:

What is that you said?

How can she be both?

Servant:

She is sinking fast

And on the point of death.

Chorus:

She will not last

Much longer, then?

Servant:

Oh no. Fate urgently

Is pressing close upon her now.

Chorus:

Is she

Prepared for burial?

Servant:

The robes she'll wear

When King Admetus buries her are there,

All ready.

Chorus:

I lament his misery –

A good man mourning the fatality

130

Of his virtuous wife.

Servant:

Admetus, though,

Until Alcestis leaves this earth, won't know

The loss he suffers.

Chorus:

Let her be aware

She'll die the noblest woman anywhere.

Servant:

Indeed – who can deny it? What should we

Call her who's acted yet more gloriously

Than she? For how can any woman show

More honour to her husband than to go

To Hades for him? We know this is true:

What she did in the house, however, you 140

Will wonder at, for when she took it in

That she was on her death-bed, her pale skin

She washed, then from its cedar chambers she

Took her fine robe and dressed becomingly

And then at Hestia's altar said a prayer:

"Lady, my final plea is that you'll care

For my poor children – give each a good spouse –

Thus let my dear son take into his house

A loving wife and let my daughter wed

A noble man, now I will soon be dead 150

And may they not, like me, so soon de cease,

But may they live their lives out here in peace.

She wreathed the altars in the house and broke

A spray of myrtle for each one and spoke

A prayer. She did not weep, no groan was in

Her mouth, the lovely colour of her skin

Unchanged at the fast-looming tragedy.

She came into the bedroom, finally

Falling to tears. She said, "O marriage-bed

I came to as a virgin when I wed 160

Admetus, for whose sake I soon shall go
To Hades, farewell! I don't hate you, though
You caused my death, and you alone, for I
Would not leave you and him, so now I die.
Another will possess you who maybe
Will have more luck but less nobility
Than I. And then she fell upon the bed
And kissed it, and with all the tears she shed
She drenched the sheets. Then from the bed she went
With stumbling footsteps and with weakness bent, 170
Wandered around, then on the bed she flung
Herself once more. Her children, weeping, hung
Upon her robe; she gave them one last kiss,
Holding them in her arms. As well as this,
The servants wept; she touched them – there were none
So poor she did not speak to every one,
Blessed in return. Such is the misery
Within the house. If he had died, he'd be
No more, but since he's still alive, his woes
Will haunt him endlessly.

Chorus:

He, I suppose, 180
Grieves for his noble wife.

Servant:

He weeps indeed
And holds her in his arms; I heard him plead
That she won't leave his side – a vain request,
For she was fading fast and sore distressed,
Slack-limbed as she lay in his fond embrace.

She wanted one last time to turn her face,
Though almost out of breath, towards the sun.
I'll tell them that you're here: not everyone
Wishes his rulers well and wants to show
The sadness that he feels for all their woe,
But you're a long-time friend.

190

Chorus A:

O Zeus, is there

Some way to extricate us from this snare
Of woes brought on the royal family?

Chorus B:

Won't someone come here? In my misery
Should I now cut her locks? And should I don
Black garments?

Chorus A:

Ah, the fate that's come upon

My mistress is too plain, as plain as day.
However, to the gods now let us pray,
Since they're pre-eminent.

Chorus B:

Paian, conceive,

I beg, some mechanism to relieve

200

Admetus.

Chorus A:

Yes indeed, for once before
You found a way. Now rescue him once more
From death! Put deadly Hades in restraint!

Chorus B:

O son of Pheres, now you feel the taint

Of your misfortune.

Chorus A:

Ah, this wretchedness

Calls for a sword to end all this distress

Or for a noose hung high.

Chorus B:

You'll see today

Your dearest wife lie dead.

Chorus A:

Coming this way

I see her and her spouse, who rules this land.

Now, Pherae, groan aloud, for to the strand 210

Of Hades she will go – the noblest wife

Of all – once she has gasped out her sad life.

Chorus:

Henceforth I'll say that there's less joy than pain

In married life, for this I must maintain

Now that I've looked on what has gone before

And on Admetus, who will evermore

Be forced to spend his days without his wife,

A nonpareil of wives – and that's no life.

Alcestis:

O Helios, who bring to us daylight!

O whirling clouds! Such a celestial sight! 220

Admetus:

In our distress we're seen from up on high:

We're clear of blame, so why have you to die?

Alcestis:

O my ancestral folkos, who bred me!

Admetus:

Poor dear, try to forget your misery.

Do not abandon me! I beg you, pray

For pity from the gods who now hold sway

Above you!

Alcestis:

I see Charon, him who rows

With his two oars upon the lake all those

Who've passed away. He stands there with his hand

Upon the pole and calls out his command 230

"No lagging now! I must be off," says he,

Insisting that I leave immediately.

Admetus:

A bitter journey! O my luckless wife,

The suffering we've undergone, the strife!

Alcestis:

Do you not see that I'm being taken down

By wingèd Hades with his dark-browed frown

Into the court of the dead. What will you do?

Let me alone. Ah, what a journey you

Conduct me on! I'm the unhappiest

Of women.

Admetus:

Yes, to those whom you love best, 240

And I, your husband, most particularly,

Our children, too, who share this tragedy

In common, feel this grief.

Alcestis:

I cannot stand.

Let go and lay me back. Death's close at hand.

My eyes are covered with the darkest night.

Children, I die. Farewell! Enjoy the light

The sun provides.

Admetus:

Oh what a painful thing

I hear, greater than any death can bring!

I beg you, do not leave me! Hear my plea

To you, by our own children who will be 250

Without a mother now. Endure! Survive!

For I would not desire to stay alive

If you were gone. For it is up to you

Whether we live or not, for we value

Your love.

Alcestis:

You clearly see the state that I

Am in, and so I wish, before I die,

To tell you what it is for which I yearn:

I honoured you, deciding, turn and turn

About, that you would yet look on the light

And I would die instead, although I might 260

Have wed a man from Thessaly and thus

Lived in a royal palace, prosperous.

But I would not be wrested from your side,

Our fatherless children with me. I denied

To spare my happy life. You were betrayed

By both your parents, though they would have made

A noble end. You were their only son,

And they would never have another one

If you were dead. Had they agreed to die,
Until our final moments you and I 270
Would have lived out our lives. Nor would you be
Grieving my passing or the misery
Of raising children who would lack a mother.
But all of this by some god or another
Was brought about. Well then, you need to show
Your gratitude to me. I will not go
So far as ask you to reciprocate
As I deserve (for mortals venerate
Life more than anything), but what is just
Is what I now request, to which you must 280
Concur. If you are sensible, then you
Adore our children as much as I do,
So keep them here as rulers of the house,
And do not think to have another spouse
To be stepmother to them, for she'll be
Less noble than me and, through jealousy,
Will on our children lay a hostile hand.
Stepmothers come in and then take command
And, deadlier than a viper, she will show
Her hatred of your children. But, although 290
A son has a father on whom he relies,
How could you, daughter, ever realize
An honoured womanhood? What mother will
You get? One who'll inflict on you some ill
And mar your chances of a marriage-bed
While you are young. I'll never see you wed
Or help you in your birthing pangs, my dear,

For nothing's better than a mother's cheer.

For I must go to Hades, not tomorrow

Or the day after that – oh no, this sorrow 300

Is imminent, for in an hour I'll be

Listed among the dead. Live happily!

Farewell! Rightly you may boast, all of you,

That I'm the best of wives, of mothers, too.

Chorus:

Be of good cheer! I'll speak for him, for he

Will do this if he's thinking sensibly.

Admetus:

While you were living you lived as my wife,

But have no fear that from the end of life

You'll bear alone that title. There will be

No bride of Thessaly who'll speak to me. 310

There's none as noble as you, or as fair.

I've progeny enough, so hear my prayer:

May the gods grant me joy in my progeny

Once you are gone. Dear wife, my misery

In losing you will last my whole life through,

And I shall ever hate my parents who

Loved me with words not deeds. But you, dear wife,

In order that I might not lose my life

Gave me your own, the very dearest thing

Of all. How can I not lament the sting 320

Of losing such a wife? I'll now stop all

The feasts, wreaths, joyous parties, guests who call

On me and all the music echoing

Throughout the palace, never handling

The lyre anymore, nor will I play
The flute to take my misery away
Because your death, dear, has eradicated
My joy of living. I will have created
By skilled craftsmen your image which I'll place
Upon my bed and lovingly embrace 330

And call your name and, though it is quite clear
That you're not there, believe you are, my dear –
A cold delight indeed, though it will buoy
My spirits; maybe, too, you'll bring me joy
In dreams, for, even as we sleep, to see
Our loved ones brings a pleasant memory
While we're allowed. With the ability
Of Orpheus so that Persephone
I could enchant I'd go to Hades, thus
Retrieving you; and neither Cerberus 340

Nor ferryman Charon could have kept me
From bringing you back to security
On earth alive. But wait until I die
And then prepare a home for us. For I
Shall bid my children here to bury me
Inside your coffin so that we will be
Together. Then I'll order them to lay
My body next to yours, and thus we may
Remain in death, for you alone have been
Faithful to me.

Chorus:

Be sure that I shall keen 350
With you and share this miserable distress

As friend to friend, for she deserves no less.

Alcestis:

Children, you've heard your father vow that he
Will not remarry and dishonour me.

Admetus:

And I swear that I will make good that vow.

Alcestis:

Then on these terms receive our children now.

Admetus:

I will indeed – a precious gift are they,
And they come from a precious hand.

Alcestis:

Then play

The mother to them now.

Admetus:

That must I do

Since now I have been made bereft of you. 360

Alcestis:

Children, although I ought to be alive
I go below.

Admetus:

How shall I then survive

Apart from you?

Alcestis:

Time heals. One who is dead

Is nothing.

Admetus:

No, take me with you instead.

Alcestis:

My death for yours suffices.

Admetus:

Destiny,

How virtuous a wife you take from me!

Alcestis:

Already now my eyes are dimmed with night.

Admetus:

I'm dead myself if you go from my sight.

Alcestis:

I leave my life behind.

Admetus:

Lift up your head!

Don't leave your children!

Alcestis:

I'm already dead 370

While leaving them. Children, a fond goodbye!

Admetus:

Look up at them! Look up!

Alcestis:

I'm gone. I die.

Admetus:

What are you doing? Are you leaving me?

Alcestis:

Husband, farewell!

Admetus:

I'm ruined utterly.

Chorus:

She's gone.

Child:

Our mother's dead: we are undone.

Father, no more will she gaze on the sun.

I'm motherless. Look at her eyes and see

Her slackened arms. Mother, listen to me.

It's I, your little one. Oh, hear me, do!

I fall upon your lips and call to you.

380

Admetus:

She cannot hear or see you, child. Oh, we

Are struck with such a great calamity.

Child:

I'm young, yet from my mother I have been

Cut far adrift. Sister, you too have seen

Much sorrow. Father, it was all in vain

That you were wed and yet did not attain

Your end of life with her. For it was she

Who died first. Now the house is utterly

Destroyed since she is gone.

Chorus:

You must endure

Your pain, Admetus, for you may be sure

390

That you are not the first man left alone

By losing your dear wife. For it's well-known

We all must die.

Admetus;

Yes, and this tragedy

Did not come on me unexpectedly.

For some time I've experienced this woe.

However, stay beside me as I go

To carry out her funeral rites , and sing

The hymn to the god who no drink-offering
Receives. And I command all Thessaly
To share the mourning of my wife with me. 400
Let them wear black and let them cut their hair.
And I command that riders everywhere,
The singles and the teams, to take a blade
And crop their steeds' manes. No sound must be made
By flute or lyre here for one whole year.
I'll never bury one who's been more dear
To me. She's earned the honour I decree,
For she alone agreed to die for me.

Chorus:

Daughter of Pelias, I bid farewell
To you. May you have joy though you will dwell 410
In sunless Hades. Let dark-haired Pluto
And Charon, the old ferryman, both know
That it's the best of women who has gone
Across the gloomy lake of Acheron.
Now with the seven-stringed lyre of tortoiseshell
Poets will sing your praises and, as well,
Sing a capella, when we solemnize
Spartan Carnea and up in the skies
The moon stays all night long, in Athens, too,
Rich, gleaming Athens. Such songs, then, for you 420
Poets will sing. O would that I could bring
You from the halls of Hades, traversing
Cocytus in a skiff, for you alone
Redeemed your husband's life because your own
You sacrificed. May the earth lie easily

Upon you, lady. Nonetheless, if he
Remarries, I will cast a hateful blame
On him: his children, too, will do the same.
His parents did not have the bravery
To die in place of their own progeny,
Unmerciful though at the end of life.
But you died in your prime, a youthful wife,
To save your husband. O I would that I
Could wed a maid like her, because we die
Too soon! She would cause me no misery
While she'd be living all my life with me.

430

Heracles:

Citizens of Pherae, can you tell me, please,
If Admetus is at home?

Chorus:

Yes, Heracles,

He is. What brings you here to Thessaly
And Pherae?

Heracles:

King Eurystheus hired me

440

To carry out a labour for him.

Chorus:

Where

Are you now bound? What wandering shall you bear?

Heracles:

I hope to find the four-horse chariot
Of Diomedes.

Chorus:

Do you, then, know what

He's like as host? Are you quite sure that you
Can do it?

Heracles:

No, for I have not been to
Bistonia as yet.

Chorus:

Without a fight
You won't possess these horses.

Heracles:

Yes, that's right
But I cannot decline.

Chorus:

Then in that case,
You'll either kill him and return or face 450
Your destiny and find your final rest
In Thrace.

Heracles:

But this is not the first contest
That I'll have run in.

Chorus:

But what will accrue
To you once these steeds' master you subdue?

Heracles:

I'll bring them back to Tiryns' lord.

Chorus:

But it
Won't prove an easy ask to put a bit
Into their mouths.

Heracles:

Unless they're breathing flame

Out of their nostrils, I will, all the same,

Succeed.

Chorus:

But with their nimble jaws they tear

Humans apart.

Heracles:

Perhaps a mountain bear

460

Would do that, not a horse.

Chorus:

No, you will see

Their troughs all drenched with blood.

Heracles;

Whose son is he,

Their master?

Chorus::

Lord of Thrace, so rich in gold.

His name's Ares.

Heracles:

This labour I have told

You of just now befits my destiny

(It's always hard and steep) which forces me

To fight his sons – first there was Lycaon,

Then Cycnus, and now I embark upon

A fight with Diomedes, though I'll be

Fighting with horses, too. No-one will see

470

Alcmene's son quiver to see the hand

Of any foe.

Chorus:

The king who rules this land,

Admetus, is approaching.

Admetus:

Progeny

Of Zeus, good-day.

Heracles:

And, king of Thessaly,

I wish you joy as well.

Admetus:

Would it were so,

Though that you are sincere I surely know.

Heracles:

Why is your hair cut short as if you were

Mourning someone?

Admetus:

Indeed I must inter

Someone today.

Heracles:

I trust the gods yet stay

Your children from misfortune.

Admetus:

Oh no, they

480

Are well at home.

Heracles:

Your father's elderly –

Could it be he who's passed away?

Admetus:

No, he

Yet lives – my mother, too.

Heracles:

Surely your wife

Alcestis has not reached the end of life!

Admetus:

There is a double tale to tell.

Heracles:

Is she

Alive or dead?

Admetus:

It brings distress to me

That she is both.

Heracles:

Speak with simplicity –

I'm in the dark.

Admetus:

Do you not know what she

Has gone through?

Heracles:

Yes, she vowed to die for you.

Admetus:

That she yet lives, therefore, cannot be true.

490

Heracles:

Defer your grief until she dies.

Admetus:

She's dead.

Heracles:

To be and not to be, it must be said,

Are separate things.

Admetus:

As are our separate views.

Heracles:

Which of your kin is dead? Tell me the news.

For you are weeping.

Admetus:

It's a woman who

Has died, as I have just been telling you.

Heracles;

One of your blood?

Admetus:

No, but close, all the same,

To all my kin.

Heracles:

Then tell me how she came

To die here?

Admetus:

When her father died, the maid

Came here to live with us and she has stayed

500

Here ever since.

Heracles:

A dreadful thing, I fear,
For you, Admetus! Would I'd not come here
To see you grieve!

Admetus:

What's that you say? Please stay.

Heracles:

I'm off to meet some friends – I'm on my way.

Admetus:

Oh, do not leave me, lord – hear my request.

Heracles:

Indeed I would be an annoying guest

As you lament.

Admetus:

The dead are dead. Instead

Come home with me.

Heracles:

When one laments the dead

A guest should not be there.

Admetus:

No, Heracles.

The house has separate rooms – in one of these 510

We'll lodge you.

Heracles:

Let me go. Nevertheless

I'm grateful for your offer, I profess.

Admetus:

No, Heracles, I can't let you abide

At someone else's house. [to a servant] Take him inside

To the guests' quarters at the farthest end

Of the palace. Let some others then attend
To setting up his table. [they go] [to some other servants] To prevent
The guests from hearing all the house lament
And let them eat in peace, I order you
To shut the other doors.

Chorus:

What's this you do, 520

My king? The house is suffering so much pain
And yet you're making plans to entertain
Some guests?

Admetus:

Would you prefer that I should add
To my misfortune? Do you call this mad?
Should I, then, slight a friend and have him sent
Away from here? Would that make you content?
And should I add to these calamities
And broadcast that we treat as enemies
Our guests, thus loading ill repute on us?

Always has Heracles been courteous 530

When I was guest in Argos, his parched land.

Chorus:

Why did you cause him to misunderstand
Your situation, then, if he came here
As a friend, as you have said?

Admetus:

I harboured fear
He wouldn't have come in if he had known
Of all the sorrows that have made me groan.
Someone would think I acted foolishly

And therefore he would not approve of me.

This house will never slight or turn away

An honoured guest as long as I hold sway. 540

Chorus:

A generous man who treats his callers well!

Mellifluous Apollo deigned to dwell

Within your house and tend your sheep among

Your hills and pipe his lovely mating-song.

He tended lynxes, too, who took delight

In what he played; there came into his sight

A pride of lions from Othrys' ravine;

A dappled fawn was also to be seen

Beyond the fir-trees, dancing trippingly,

Rejoicing in the joyful melody. 550

With all his many sheep he dwelt beside

Lake Boibias with its fair-flowing tide,

Where the sun's steeds are stabled far away

Beyond Molossus' peaks, and he holds sway

As far as rocky Pelion. Now he

Receives a guest, though weeping copiously

In mourning for his darling wife's decease.

For his trustworthy nature will not cease

Its pity and respect. For all that's good

Resides within the honoured brotherhood 560

Of noble mortals. It amazes me

How wise she was. I know with certainty

God-fearing men will always have success.

Good folk, the body is in readiness

For burial. The servants bear her to

The grave and pyre on their shoulders. You,
As is the custom, bid my wife goodbye
Upon her final journey.

Chorus:

Look! I spy
Your father with his servants carrying
The trappings fashioned for embellishing 570
The dead.

Pheres:

I come to share your sorrows, son:
For it won't be denied by anyone
That she was virtuous and wise. But we
Must bear this very bitter tragedy.
Here, take this robe and bury it with her.
We're bound to honour her when we inter
Her corpse, for she will be among the dead
Because she chose to perish in your stead.
Through her I'm not bereft of progeny,
Fated to wither in senility,. 580
Lamenting you. All women everywhere
Through her virtuous act have gained a fair
Repute. You served Admetus, and, when I
Was falling, you supported me. Goodbye!
And may you prosper even down below
The earth. You had a marriage that was so
Perfect it was a boon to all mankind.
If not, to marriage don't pay any mind.

Admetus:

You have no invitation to attend

These funeral rites, and you are not a friend. 590

She will not wear the finery you bring:

Nothing of yours will see her burying.

Though you're well-struck in years, you stepped aside

And just because of that a young maid died.

And now you've come to mourn her? Well, it's clear

You're not my rightful father – do you hear?

She who has said that she gave birth to me

Did not do so – no, I was secretly

Put at her breast, born of a slave. Yes, you,

Put to the test, showed your true self. I do 600

Not count myself your son. How cowardly

You are! Though aged and precariously

Nearing your end, you did not have the guts

To die for your own son. No ifs or buts!

You and your spouse allowed my wife to die,

Who had no kindred blood in her. Now I

Take *her* as both the parents you once were.

Yet dying for your son, instead of her,

Would have been nobly done, especially

Since you're approaching your life's boundary. 610

Your happy days are over. As a king

You spent your youthful days while fathering

Your son and heir. So that at your decease

Nobody else could shatter Pherae's peace

With plunder. You can't say you'd let me die

Because I slighted your old age, for I

Have always honoured you. So this is how

You both have paid me back. Well, hurry now,

Beget more children who will care for you
In your old age and, when your death is due, 620
Lay out your body. It will not be me!
For I am dead to you. And if I see
Another saviour, for him I will care
In his old age and be his son. I swear
That all those aged men who pray for death,
Being unhappy since they still have breath,
Are insincere. But once one's death is near,
It's not disheartening and brings no fear.

Chorus:

Stop railing, for this present tragedy
Is quite enough. So cease your calumny. 630

Pheres:

Whom do you think you're yelling at, my lad? –
Some bumpkin slave of yours who can be had
With cash? You know that I'm from Thessaly,
Freeborn, begotten quite legitimately
By a Thessalian father. In insult
You've gone too far. And what is the result?
You'll pay for it. I brought you up to be
My heir, but it is not obligatory
To die for you, for dying for one's son
Is not a law laid down for anyone. 640

Your happiness and your despondency
Are yours alone. What you received from me
By justice you possess, for here you reign
Over a wealth of subjects, and you'll gain
Diverse acres of property when I die,

Your family legacy. What harm have I
Done you? What have I robbed from you? Then do
Not die for me and I'll not die for you.
You're happy – do you think that I'm not so?
I truly estimate our time below 650

As long, but here on earth it's momentary,
Though sweet. At all events, though, shamelessly
You've striven to avoid your fated span
On earth by killing *her*. Therefore, how can
You call me coward when you're obviously
A spineless man yourself. In bravery
Your wife outclassed you, for among the dead
She lies below, for she died in your stead –
Oh such a fine young man! A clever way

You have concocted that you may betray 660
The Fates, persuading each wife, one by one,
To die on your behalf. Ah, such a son
To chide your kin for failing to do this
When you yourself are full of cowardice!
Then hold your tongue! Consider that if you
Love life, then everyone on earth does, too.
But if you carry on insulting me,
With truth I'll answer each indignity.

Chorus:
We've had too much reproach. Old sir, now cease 670

Reviling your own son and hold your peace.
Admetus:

Let's carry on, though. If to hear what's true
Is painful for you it is wrong of you

To slight me.

Pheres:

Wrong? If I died in your stead

I'd do more wrong.

Admetus:

What's that? Is being dead

The same for old and young?

Pheres:

Our human span

Should be *one* life.

Admetus:

May you live longer than

Lord Zeus, then!

Pheres:

Do you curse your father who

Has done no wrong?

Admetus:

Oh yes, for I see you

Craving more years.

Pheres:

And yet it's *you* I see

Carrying out Alcestis' obsequy.

680

You're still alive.

Admetus:

Ah yes, that is a sign

Of cravenness.

Pheres:

They were not hands of mine

That caused her death.

Admetus:

O would that you might need

My help some day!

Pheres:

Woo many maids indeed

And cause more deaths!

Admetus:

But you declined to die –

The fault's with you.

Pheres:

The sun-god in the sky

Provides a lovely light.

Admetus:

How cowardly!

Pheres:

But at my funeral you'll not scoff at me.

Admetus:

Yet you will be dishonoured when you die.

Pheres:

I won't care what men say of me, for I

690

Will then be dead.

Admetus:

Age has such shamelessness.

Pheres:

Alcestis was not shameless, although less

Than sensible.

Admetus:

Be off! Let me inter

Her corpse.

Pheres:

I'm going. Yes, you'll bury her
And yet you killed her, too, and you will pay
The penalty to your in-laws one day.
Acastus would no longer be among
True men if he refused to right the wrong
His sister bore.

Admetus:

Then go! You and your wife
Deserve to live a wholly childless life, 700
Though with one child live. You'll never be
Under my roof again. If some decree
Or other had compelled me to forswear
Your house, I would have done so then and there.
[to the chorus] But since we must endure our present woe,
We must inter our dead, so let us go.

Chorus:

Farewell to one so firm in bravery!
May Hermes and Hades hospitably
Greet you! If good folk have advantage there,
As Hades' bride may you have your due share. [exeunt] 710

Servant:

Many a foreigner in this house I've seen
And served them dinner, but they've never been
As boorish as the man we entertain
At present. Although he beheld the pain
Our master suffered, he nevertheless
Came through the doors in all his shamelessness.
He did not soberly accept the fare

We set before him, though he knew our care.
He carried on demanding more. If he
Craved food that was not there, vociferously 720
He yelled for it. He took an ivy cup
Brimming with unmixed wine and drank it up,
And very soon he was intoxicated.
Then, wreathed in myrtle-sprays, he ululated
Some tuneless, garbled songs. He paid no mind
To all Admetus' troubles as he dined,
While we bewailed our mistress' death, although
The tears that stained our cheeks we did not show
To him, as per Admetus's taboo.

But now I still must feast this foul yahoo. 730
My mistress now has gone, but I must stay,
Not holding out my hand in my dismay.
She had been like a mother to us all,
Releasing us from woes that often fall
Upon us, softening her husband's mood.
This guest within the house who was so rude
I hate! – with reason. [enter Heracles]
Heracles:

 You there, why do you
Look grave and care-worn? That just will not do!
A servant should not scowl at guests. No, he
Should give a welcome to them affably. 740
Your master's friend you greet with knitted brow
And stern demeanour, managing somehow
To grieve a woe that is not your concern.
Come over here and I will make you learn

Some wisdom! Do you know what life's about
And how we mortals live? You don't, no doubt –
How could you? Listen to me – everyone
Must die. Nobody, when the day is done,
Knows if he'll last the night. We may not see
Just how our future will turn out to be, 750
For it's beyond all art. So now that you
Have learned this, drink, be happy, hold the view
That your life is your own but that it's Fate
Controlling all things else. And venerate
Queen Aphrodite, for she's known to be
The sweetest, kindest divinity.

Forget all else. Listen to what I say
(That I'm correct I'm sure you know) and lay
Aside excessive sorrow. Come and drink
With me and, once you're drunk, I surely think 760
This fit of gloom will go away. We ought,
As mortals, to be mortal in our thought.
But solemn men who knit their brows possess
A life that brings nought but unhappiness.

Servant:

I know; but as things stand, it's not for us
To drink and laugh – it's not felicitous.

Heracles:

The woman who has died does not belong
Within the house, so do not grieve so long!
Your master's living, and his lady, too.

Servant:

What do you mean by 'living'? Do not you 770

Know of our grief?

Heracles:

Of course I do, unless

Your master's lying.

Servant,

Well, his courteousness

Has proved excessive.

Heracles:

If someone has died

Who's unrelated to me, should I hide

My revelling?

Servant:

She meant so much to us,

Too much indeed.

Heracles:

Has some calamitous

Event occurred that he's not told to me?

Servant:

Pay it no mind. Our master's agony

Is our concern.

Heracles:

I think I realize

That it's no foreign grief.

Servant:

Yes, otherwise

780

I'd not be vexed to see you revelling.

Heracles:

My host, I think, has done a dreadful thing

To me.

Servant:

To greet you is not apropos.

See our shorn hair, our black garb and our woe.

Heracles:

Then has his aged father passed away?

One of his children?

Servant:

No, I have to say

It was his wife.

Heracles:

Yet he played host to me?

Servant:

It was against your host's integrity

To thrust you out.

Heracles:

Ah, such a virtuous wife

You've lost, poor man!

Servant:

We're all bereft of life,

Not only she.

Heracles:

Ah, such a virtuous wife

You've lost, poor man!

Servant:

We're all bereft of life,

790

Not only she.

Heracles:

Indeed I saw your eyes

Moistened with tears, your garb and sombre guise,

But I assumed that you were burying
A stranger and, through my wrong reasoning,
I came in and within a house of woe
I revelled, garlanded. How can I go
On doing so? With all this grievous care
Now heaped up on the house, now tell me where
He's burying her.

A sculpted tomb you'll see

My heart and hand have had so much to bear,
But now I have to show what kind of son
Alcmene bore, child of Electryon,
To Zeus himself and show my gratitude
To the king and cause his wife to be renewed
And brought back to the house where recently
She died, for I should go and try to see
The black-robed lord of Hades. I assume
He's drinking his libations near the tomb. 810
If I should ambush him, encircling
Him in my vise-like grip, there's not a thing
That one can do to rescue him from me
Till he lets go Alcestis. But if he
Eludes me by his absence, I will go
Down to that sunless edifice below
And ask for her. I think that I will bring
Her back to earth and give her to the king,

My good host who did not drive me away,
Though plagued with dreadful sorrow and dismay: 820
This sorrow, though,, In his nobility,
He has concealed out of respect for me.
Now what Thessalian or Grecian can
Be as hospitable as is this man?
So he'll not say, then, that he has been kind
To someone who has an ungrateful mind. [exit] [enter Admetus]

Admetus:
This house is such a hateful sight to see,
Robbed of its mistress. Ah, what misery!
Where shall I go? Where stay? And what am I
To say or not divulge? Would I could die! 830
My mother bore me for this awful fate.
The dead I envy, hankering for their state.
I long to dwell in those dim halls below.
I do not wish to see daylight or go
About the earth. Death took her prisoner
And I'll be ever kept apart from her.

Chorus:

Go in,

Admetus:

Ah!

Chorus:

Such a wail!

Admetus:

Oh pain! Oh woe!

Chorus:

The pain that you have suffered I well know.

Admetus:

The grief!

Chorus:

Your words will not help your dead wife.

Admetus:

O gods!

Chorus:

To be compelled to live your life 840

Without her will be painful.

Admetus:

You awake

Within my memory my heart's harsh ache.

Whet greater sorrow can there ever be

Than loss of a wife of such great loyalty?

Would I had never wed her, for indeed

I envy those who clearly feel no need

Of marriage or children, for they possess

Only one soul and their unhappiness

Is moderate. How hard it is to see

A child who's suffering a malady 850

Or lose a wife to death, though we all may

Enjoy a single life from day to day!

Chorus:

Inexorable fate!

Admetus:

Ah, misery!

Chorus:

Yet on your grief you set no boundary.

Admetus:

The pain!

Chorus:

That pain is hard to bear, but still...

Admetus:

O gods, the grief!

Chorus:

...endure it, for this ill

You're not the first to bear

Admetus:

Ah, misery!

Chorus:

We all must undergo calamity

Of one sort or another.

Admetus:

Ah, how great

The pain and grief that we feel for the fate 860

Of our deceased loved ones who lie below

The earth! When I was hankering to throw

Myself into her grave and lie content

With her in death, why then did you prevent

My doing so? She was most virtuous:

Hades would have received the two of us

Together, two devoted souls. And so

Together we'd have crossed the lake below.

Chorus:

I had a relative whose one child went

Below the earth, full worthy of lament, 870

And yet he bore his sorrow moderately

Although without an heir, indubitably

Grey-haired and aged.

Admetus:

How am I to go
Into my dismal house when I am so
Changed in my fortunes? Once, with brands of pine,
Holding the hand of that dear wife of mine,
I entered as I heard the bridal song
As we were followed by a clamorous throng,
Blessing us both in our nobility,
Now man and wife. But now what misery, 880
In answer to those songs, what robes of black
As I go to my chamber in my lack!

Chorus:

This grief has come to you in your good cheer
While you were free from woe. But you're still here,
Alive, though she is dead – not something new
For others lost their wives as well as you.

Admetus:

My friends, my wife's lot's happier than my own,
Though it may not seem so. She'll never moan
With grief again and she's attained a state
Of honour. I, who have escaped my fate 890
And should not live, will live my life in pain.
I know this now, for how could I remain
Within my house? Who now will welcome me,
Whom will I welcome with felicity?
And whither shall I go? For my despair
Shall oust me since my wife's no longer there,
My bed is empty and will evermore

Be so, the chairs she sat in, too; the floor
Remains unswept, the children sit about
My knees and mourn their mother, servants shout 900

Their grief, while, outside, weddings well-supplied
With women will propel me back inside.

A woman who's my wife's age I'll not be
Able to look at, and an enemy
Will say, "Behold that man! Such a disgrace!

In order to escape death, in his place
He gave his wife. Such abject cowardice!

Can any of us think a man like this
Could be a man at all? He's so afraid
Of death he hates his parents, for their aid 910

To die instead of him they would not give."

Such slights as this, as long as I may live,

I must endure as well as all the pain

I have already. What, then, is the gain

In living in this dreadful situation

And having such a shattered reputation?

Chorus:

I've soared with noble thought and poetry

And, though I have reflected frequently,

I know that Fate's the strongest thing, and there

Is no correction for it anywhere 920

(In Thracian tablets it cannot be seen

Nor in the drugs that Phoebus used to glean

To give assistance to humanity,

Passed on then to Asclepius' progeny).

She has no shrine, no statue, pays no heed

To sacrifice. Don't come with greater speed,
Lady, to me, I pray. What Zeus decrees
You help him do. Even the Chalybes'
Iron you overcome, and you possess
No pity. You, Admetus, that goddess
Has caught in her tight chains. For you can't bring
The dead from Hades just by blubbering. 930

Even gods die. When she was with us, she
Was loved and will be in eternity,
A very noble wife. Let not her tomb
Be thought of as a mound wherein those whom
We mourn are laid to rest, but let them be
Valued with the immortals equally,
Revered by passers-by. While on his way,
Somebody will be walking past and say,
"She died for her own husband – therefore she
Has now become a blessed divinity. 940

Bless *us*, dear lady." That's what they will say.
But look – there's Heracles, coming our way.
Heracles:
Friends should speak frankly and not silently
Store up reproaches. So it seemed to me,
Admetus, right that I should fortify
You in your misery and prove that I
Am still your friend. And yet you have repressed
The fact your wife has been laid out and dressed
For burial; you feasted me and said
One not your own was being mourned. My head 950
I garlanded and poured libations to

The gods while this distress tormented you.
 I censure you for this, I do, and yet
 I do not wish to hurt you or upset
 You in your misery. I'll tell you why
 I've come back here: until the time when I
 Have killed the ruler of the Bistones
 And brought the Thracian mares back, will you please
 Agree to keep this maid? But if I should
 Be killed (Heaven forfend!) you may for good 960
 Employ her as a servant. I possess
 The maid after a deal of strain and stress -
 An athletic contest was happening:
 I took part and came first, acquiring
 The maid as my award, while those men who
 Won in the light events got as their due
 Horses. Those men who were victorious
 In contests held to be more serious,
 The boxing and the wrestling, all earned
 Both cattle and a woman. Since I'd turned 970
 Up there, it seemed a pity not to take
 The chance to gain some profit and to make
 Some glory for myself. But, as I say,
 Take her. I did not steal the maid away
 But won her fair and square, and strenuously.
 In time you will praise me for this maybe.
 Admetus:
 I was not slighting or considering
 You as a foe when all my sorrowing
 And all the misery my wife went through

I hid. It would have been much worse if you 980

Had gone elsewhere. For I have too much woe

Already. So I'm begging you to go

To someone else who's suffered less and may

Employ the maid, for you have an array

Of guest-friends you may ask here in Pherae.

Do not remind me of my woe, for I,

If I should see her in the house, would be

Unable to hold back my misery.

Please don't add pain to pain, for I'm now weighed

Down with despair. Where would I house a maid? 990

For she is youthful, as is evident

By how she dresses. Should she, though, be sent

To the men's quarters? But how could she then

Remain untouched among those youthful men?

It's hard to curb a youth. You are my care

In this. My wife's room? No! What – put her where

She used to sleep? I fear my subjects may

Cast in my teeth the charge that I betray

The memory of her who rescued me

By sleeping with another: I must be 1000

Faithful to her and keep her in my mind.

Whoever you are, young lady, you remind

Me of my dead wife. Ah, what agony

I suffer! Take this maid away from me!

Don't slay a dead man! For when I regard

This maid, I see my wife – how very hard

That is! My heart begins to pound, my eyes

Are moist. It's only now I realize

The full extent of all of my distress
And taste my grief in all its bitterness.

1010

Chorus:

Fate is unkind, but we must in the end
Endure whatever ills the gods may send.

Heracles:

I wish I could go to the halls below
And bring Alcestis back to you.

Admetus:

I know

You do, but what's the point? That cannot be.

Heracles:

Do not, then, grieve your loss excessively.

Admetus:

It's easier to give one's point of view
Than bear misfortune.

Heracles:

But what good will you

Achieve if till your death you plan to bear
Your grief with lamentation?

Admetus:

I'm aware

1020

That there's no good at all but, nonetheless,
My longing drives me on.

Heracles:

Yes, your distress

Is stirred by your great love for her.

Admetus:

Her death

Has slain me, more than I can give it breath.

Heracles:

You've lost a noble wife, none can deny.

Admetus:

And till the end of life no joy will I

Experience.

Heracles:

But time will heal your grief.

Admetus:

Time, yes, if by that you mean the relief

That death will bring.

Heracles:

A woman and a new

Marriage will end your longing.

Admetus:

Hush! What you 1030

Have said is shocking.

Heracles:

What? You will not wed?

Admetus:

No woman ever is to share my bed.

Heracles:

Do you suppose that's doing any good

To your dead wife?

Admetus:

Wherever she is, I should

Do honour to her.

Heracles:

That's exemplary.

But you are being foolish.

Admetus:

Although she
Is gone, I'd rather die than be untrue
To my wife's memory.

Heracles:

I ask that you
Take in this maid.

Admetus:

Don't ask me!

Heracles:

But you'll err
If you turn down the chance of taking her. 1040

Admetus:

But if I take her, I will feel the sting
Of woe.

Heracles:

Receive her, for it just might bring
Good fortune to you.

Admetus:

How I wish that she
Was not awarded you!

Heracles:

My victory
You now could share.

Admetus:

Well said: but she must go.

Heracles:

She will do if she must. Be certain, though,
That it's your will.

Admetus:

It is indeed, unless

You have a firm intention to express

Your wrath to me.

Heracles:

I have my reasons, though,

For wanting you to take her.

Admetus:

Alright, go

1050

Ahead, but I'm not pleased with what you do.

Heracles:

Then do what I insist on. Someday you

Will thank me.

Admetus:

[to the servants] Take her in, then, if I must

Receive her in my house.

Heracles:

I won't entrust

The maid to slaves.

Admetus:

Take her yourself, then.

Heracles:

No,

To you I'll give her.

Admetus:

Oh, no, let her go

Inside. I won't touch her.

Heracles:

It must be you

And no-one else.

Admetus:

You're forcing me to do

Something against my will.

Heracles:

Reach out your hand.

Be brave!

Admetus:

I'm doing so at your command.

1060

It feels as though I am about to cleave

Medusa's head.

Heracles:

You've got her?

Admetus:

Yes.

Heracles:

Receive

Her, then. Look after her and one day you

Will say I am your friend, honest and true.

Look at her – does she not look like your wife?

Leave woe behind! Once more enjoy your life!

Admetus:

What can I say? It's extraordinary!

Is this my wife Alcestis that I see?

Or is this some delusive artifice

Sent by a god to madden me?

Heracles:

No, this

1070

Is your Alcestis.

Admetus:

Or is it a ghost

Sent from the Underworld?

Heracles:

My kindly host,

I cannot raise the dead.

Admetus:

But do I see

The wife I buried? Tell me, is it she?

Heracles:

It is. I'm not surprised you disbelieve

Your luck.

Admetus:

Shall I enfold her and receive

Her as my wife?

Heracles:

Do so, for you embrace

All you desired.

Admetus:

I see my dearest's face,

I see her quite beyond all expectation.

Heracles:

You have her. May there be no detestation

1080

From Heaven!

Admetus:

Noble Heracles, may you

Possess good fortune, and may Lord Zeus, who

Begot you, keep you safe all of your life,

For you alone revived me since my wife

You have returned. How was it that you brought

Her from below into the light?

Heracles:

I fought

The god who held her.

Admetus:

Where, then, was the fight

With Death?

Heracles:

Hard by the tomb I seized him tight.

Admetus:

Why does she stand there mute?

Heracles:

You are denied

To speak with her until she's purified 1090

Among the nether gods on the third day.

So take her in, Admetus, and, I pray,

Show to your guests a good man's piety.

But now I say farewell. And, as for me,

There is a labour that I must complete

For King Eurystheus.

Admetus:

No, stay! Take a seat

And dine with us!

Heracles:

There'll be another day

For that, my lord. But I must rush away. [exit]

Admetus:

Good fortune go with you! Now I must bear

My orders to my people everywhere 1100

In all four cities that they duly raise

Songs for these happy tidings and give praise

To all the gods and make their altars fat

With sacrifices of our bulls , for that

Our life is so much better than we had

Before, and my new fortunes make me glad.

Chorus:

In many forms we see divinity:

The gods accomplish unexpectedly

So many things. Some things that me have thought

Would happen have not, while some god has brought 1110

To pass the unexpected. You've been told

A tale in which such things as this unfold.

