NOTHING BUT RHETORIC? RHETORIC, PRAGMATICS AND MYTH-MAKING IN THE *AGŌN* OF EURIPIDES' *ALCESTIS**

ABSTRACT

This paper draws on Euripides' Alcestis *to propose a new way of approaching the tragic* agōn*. It reads the debate scene of that play not as a rhetorical showpiece but as a piece of dialogue and an interaction that follows the principles of communicative pragmatics. In this interpretation Admetus and Pheres do not aim to persuade each other about whether it would have been right for Pheres to sacrifice his life for his son; instead, father and son are engaged in redefining their relationship, at the same time hurting each other as much as possible. Therefore, analyses that focus on ethical arguments concerning Pheres' refusal to die and on how they reflect on the two persons' characters fail to capture an essential aspect of the quarrel. If, however, the communicative nature of the* agōn *is taken into consideration, illogical and seemingly idiosyncratic passages of the speeches can be explained as functional, and its transformed purpose chimes with Euripides' rearrangement of the traditional myth, as he places the debate after Alcestis' death.*

Keywords: Greek tragedy; Euripides; *Alcestis*; *agōn*; pragmatics; myth-making

The tragic *agōn* is the child of a rhetorical period and culture.[1] Its first known occurrence is usually assumed to be in Sophocles' *Ajax* (probably from the 440s, perhaps slightly earlier or later),[2] where it already appears in its full-fledged form. It thus predates the heyday of the sophistic movement in Athens, which is commonly associated with Gorgias' appearance in the city in 427. At its centre stands the antilogy, a pair of opposing speeches that—not entirely coincidentally—is reminiscent of another form of *agōn*: the trial in court, where the same format is observed when speakers battle it out over legal and sometimes political issues.

Accordingly, rhetoric has been used as the key to the interpretation of *agōn* scenes, both on the structural and on the content level. There is, on the one hand, the analysis of the speeches regarding their adherence to the classical rhetorical teaching, especially of the *dispositio*, and the correspondences between the two speeches; on the other

[1] On the development and form of the *agōn*, cf. M. Dubischar, 'Der Kommunikationsmodus der Debatte im griechischen Drama (Aischylos, Sophokles, Euripides, Aristophanes)', *Jahrbuch Rhetorik* 25 (2006), 14–29; general studies include F. Tietze, *Die Euripideischen Reden und ihre Bedeutung* (Diss., Breslau, 1933); J. Duchemin, *L'ἀγών dans la tragédie grecque* (Paris, 1945); G. Graf, *Die Agonszenen bei Euripides* (Diss., Göttingen, 1950); R. Senoner, *Der Rede-Agon im Euripideischen Drama* (Diss., Vienna, 1960); C. Collard, 'Formal debates in Euripides' drama', *G&R* 22 (1975), 58–71 = J. Mossman (ed.), *Oxford Readings in Classical Studies. Euripides* (Oxford, 2003), 64–80; M. Lloyd, *The Agon in Euripides* (Oxford, 1992); M. Dubischar, *Die Agonszenen bei Euripides. Untersuchungen zu ausgewählten Dramen* (Stuttgart and Weimar, 2001).

[2] For the most recent detailed discussion, cf. P.J. Finglass, *Sophocles: Ajax* (Cambridge, 2011), 1–11.

hand, the arguments themselves are scrutinized. In this latter direction of research, the *agōnes* are approached with a view to identifying problems usually of an ethical nature. The arguments are evaluated to identify the stronger side and, in the end, the judgement about which cause is better is turned into one about which speaker (by arguing for the better cause) is the 'better' person.[3]

As scholarship has increasingly tended to explore ethical grey areas, one-sided verdicts for or against individual speakers have become scarcer, but the basic idea of identifying and interpreting moral problems as keys to the plays has remained common. Instead of right and wrong, it is now the moral dilemma that is extracted from the opposing stances taken in speeches; but still, the controversial question of the discussion is taken as a key to the 'issue' of the play: the playwright is understood to present a situation of high moral complexity, in which the characters are unable to decide for a single 'right' course of action.[4]

Two different approaches have initiated a partial shift in the consideration of the *agōn*. Desmond Conacher has read the speeches as expression of the speakers' characters; he has been followed in this, among others, by Donald Mastronarde and Bill Allan, who appreciate that the way in which speakers state their cases is as informative and significant as the cases themselves, and that rhetoric and character are intertwined.[5] Meanwhile, Ruth Scodel has undertaken to explain the apparently artificial and self-reflective character of many *agōn* speeches not as the encroachment of an extra-dramatic mode of presentation but as the speakers' deliberate engagement in 'verbal performance'.[6] Both readings constitute an important advancement in the treatment of the *agōn*: they regard it as an interaction rather than as a juxtaposition of conflicting views and harness the manner in which the participants speak for their interpretation.

The *agōn* of *Alcestis* has proven a popular subject of both the rhetorical and the interactional trend of interpretation. In the prehistory to this play, Admetus, king of Pherae, has been doomed to die unless he could find someone willing to suffer that fate for him. Neither his father Pheres nor his mother is prepared to sacrifice their lives, but then Alcestis agrees to die for her husband. The play's *agōn* takes place at Alcestis' bier: Admetus reproaches Pheres for his refusal to die, while Pheres denies that he had been under any obligation to do so. He returns the accusation, reproaching his son for allowing his wife to die in his stead.

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[3] A relatively recent example of this approach is Dubischar (n. 1 [2001]), who dedicates an entire chapter to 'Auswirkungen der Agonszene auf die Rezeptionsperspektive' (284), i.e. to the influence of the spectators' emotional involvement with the characters.

[4] Lloyd (n. 1), 131. On individual plays, see P. Burian, '*Logos* and *pathos*. The politics of the *Suppliant Women*', in id. (ed.), *Directions in Euripidean Criticism. A Collection of Essays* (Durham, NC, 1985), 129–55; J. de Romilly, 'La belle Hélène et l'évolution de la tragédie grecque', *LEC* 56 (1988), 129–43; C. Riedweg, 'Der Tragödiendichter als Rhetor? Redestrategien in Euripides' *Hekabe* und ihr Verhältnis zur zeitgenössischen Rhetoriktheorie', *RhM* 143 (2000), 1–32; M. Quijada Sagrados, 'Competición verbal y dialéctica de posiciones en Eurípides, *Ifigenia en Áulide*: el agón entre Agamenón y Menelao', in J.A. López Férez et al. (edd.), Πολυπραγμοσύνη: homenaje al *profesor Alfonso Martínez Díez* (Madrid, 2016), 599–608.

[5] D. Conacher, 'Rhetoric and relevance in Euripidean drama', *AJPh* 102 (1981), 3–25; W. Allan, *The* Andromache *and Euripidean Tragedy* (Oxford, 2000), especially 125; D.J. Mastronarde, *The Art of Euripides. Dramatic Technique and Social Context* (Cambridge, 2010), 222–34. Similarly, P.J. Finglass, *Sophocles: Electra* (Cambridge, 2007), 252–3; R. Rutherford, *Greek Tragic Style. Form, Language and Interpretation* (Cambridge, 2012), 194. They all, however, partly fall back to the question of whether the speaker's position is correct.

[6] R. Scodel, 'Verbal performance and Euripidean rhetoric', *ICS* 24/5 (1999–2000), 129–44.

    In earlier discussions the judgement on this issue depended largely on the assessment
of Admetus, and of the character of the play: one either agreed with Admetus
concerning Pheres' obligation or condemned him. Consequently, Admetus was either
seen as deserving of receiving back Alcestis at the end of the play (which turns the
play into a marvellous fairy tale)[7] or as guilty as charged by his father (then the end
cannot be read other than in an ironic way).[8] While these interpretations occasionally
still rear their heads,[9] nowadays the prevailing view is that neither of the opponents
is right. The questions of who was to die and how Admetus ought to have acted,
however, have not been abandoned.[10] Instead of being absolved or condemned, he is
now commonly stated to have been in a quagmire. Lloyd's influential interpretation
detects in Admetus' accusations against Pheres a 'tension between correctness and
inappropriateness': his demands were reasonable but he 'is not in a position to criticize
other people for being afraid of death'.[11] His own refusal to die, which Pheres depicts as
a choice, has led to the interpretation of his fate as a dilemma: his death would have been
bad for him, but accepting Alcestis' sacrifice has made his life even more miserable.[12]
The ideas of the *agōn* provide the key to the play: they are used to judge Admetus'
actions, his behaviour and, ultimately, his worth in the play.

    Instead of reading the speeches as a sophistic battle between two views,[13] this paper
aims to understand them in a pragmatic way, as moves in a communicative interaction—
that is, as speech acts—appropriate to the dramatic situation. This approach will, at the
same time, go beyond the 'characterizing' interpretation: Conacher finds that Admetus'
choice of words is partly unconsciously ironic and reveals his 'insensitive lack of
perception', which reflects his blindness for his own situation earlier on.[14] Mastronarde
similarly attempts to read Admetus' delivery—an outburst of aggressive rhetoric triggered,
in his view, by the moral complexity of the case and the pressure of the argumentative
context—as grounded in his personality.[15] We shall see that Admetus' aggressiveness
can be read as both motivated and purposeful rather than as an uncontrolled outpouring
of a flawed character. The dialogue and the sometimes eccentric argumentation, especially
on Admetus' part, become understandable if we bring the illocutionary purpose of the
speech act in the specific communicative situation into view.

    [7] A.P. Burnett, 'The virtues of Admetus', *CPh* 60 (1965), 240–55; A. Lesky, 'Der angeklagte
Admet', *Maske und Kothurn* 10 (1964), 203–16 = *Gesammelte Schriften* (Bern and Munich, 1966),
281–94.
    [8] D.F.W. van Lennep, *Selected Plays. Part 1, The Alcestis* (Leiden, 1949), 36; K. von Fritz,
'Euripides' *Alkestis* und ihre modernen Nachahmer und Kritiker', *A&A* 5 (1956), 27–70.
    [9] E.g. D.J. Jakob, 'Der Redenstreit in Euripides' *Alkestis* und der Charakter des Stückes', *Hermes*
127 (1999), 274–85 and id., 'Euripides' *Alcestis* as closed drama', *RFIC* 138 (2010), 14–27, at 21 for
the interpretation as fairy tale. Dubischar (n. 1 [2001]), 295–307 and S. Kurczyk, 'Ein Ende des
Schreckens oder ein schreckliches Ende? Überlegungen zum Problem der Verantwortung in
Euripides' *Alkestis*', *WJA* 31 (2007), 15–35, at 29 are still critical of Admetus.
    [10] For an overview of current scholarship, cf. E. Visvardi, 'Alcestis', in L. McClure (ed.),
A Companion to Euripides (Malden, MA, 2017), 61–79. Since the discussion has remained
undecided, the focus on the *dramatis personae* has diminished and there is now an increased trend
to look at motifs instead of characters.
    [11] Lloyd (n. 1), 40; also id., 'Euripides' *Alcestis*', *G&R* 32 (1985), 119–31.
    [12] D.J. Conacher, *Euripides: Alcestis* (Warminster, 1988), 40–1 and M. Hose, *Euripides. Der
Dichter der Leidenschaften* (Munich, 2008), 47, going back to W. Kullmann, 'Zum Sinngehalt der
euripideischen Alkestis', *A&A* 13 (1967), 127–49, at 141.
    [13] 'These gegen These', as E.-R. Schwinge, *Die Verwendung der Stichomythie in den Dramen des
Euripides* (Heidelberg, 1968), 34 puts it.
    [14] Conacher (n. 5), 8.
    [15] Mastronarde (n. 5), 227–9 and n. 38.

I. PROBLEMS WITH A RHETORICAL READING

When one tries to read the *agōn* of *Alcestis* as a debate on whether Pheres had an obligation to sacrifice himself for his son, it may seem puzzling from the outset that the entire argument is futile, as it concerns past, not future, action: Pheres has missed his chance to die for his son, while Alcestis is now dead. The course of events will not change, irrespective of which case comes out on top. Either the scene is sophistic rhetoric as an end in itself for the audience's entertainment,[16] or an entirely new solution for the scene has to be sought.

A judgement on the issue is also made difficult by the fact that Admetus' speech is astonishingly unhelpful for that purpose. First, its structure shows that the point that Admetus is making is not actually on the presumed issue. Second, within forty-two lines the speech contains inconsistencies, irrelevancies and implausibilities. Deficiencies of such order are disturbing and should give pause even to those who believe that Euripides intended to portray Admetus as in the wrong and morally inferior. In any case, a bad speech does not mean that its cause is bad: the audience is not provided with adequate information to decide whether Pheres had a duty to die.

To illustrate the structural problems with Admetus' speech, it will suffice to look at its first section. The scene starts when Pheres arrives and offers his condolences as well as grave offerings. Admetus starts his response with a rejection (*Alc.* 629–39):[17]

> οὔτ' ἦλθες ἐς τόνδ' ἐξ ἐμοῦ κληθεὶς τάφον
> οὔτ' ἐν φίλοισι σὴν παρουσίαν λέγω.   630
> κόσμον δὲ τὸν σὸν οὔποθ' ἥδ' ἐνδύσεται·
> οὐ γάρ τι τῶν σῶν ἐνδεὴς ταφήσεται.
> τότε ξυναλγεῖν χρῆν σ' ὅτ' ὠλλύμην ἐγώ·
> σὺ δ' ἐκποδὼν στὰς καὶ παρεὶς ἄλλωι θανεῖν
> νέωι γέρων ὢν τόνδ' ἀποιμώξηι νεκρόν·   635
> οὐκ ἦσθ' ἄρ' ὀρθῶς τοῦδε σώματος πατήρ,
> οὐδ' ἡ τεκεῖν φάσκουσα καὶ κεκλημένη
> μήτηρ μ' ἔτικτε, δουλίου δ' ἀφ' αἵματος
> μαστῶι γυναικὸς σῆς ὑπεβλήθην λάθραι.

I did not invite you to this funeral, nor do I count your presence here as that of a friend. As for your finery, she shall never wear it, for she needs nothing of yours for her burial. You should have shared my trouble when I was dying. You stood aside and, though you are old, allowed a young person to die: will you now come to mourn her? You were not, as it now seems clear, truly my father, nor did she who claims to have borne me and is called my mother really give me birth, but I was born of some slave and secretly put to your wife's breast.

The passage already defies the conventional rhetorical division. Duchemin views lines 629–32 as the introduction: it comprises the reply to Pheres' initial address and, as such, forms a self-contained passage.[18] Lines 633–5 are explained by Duchemin as 'position de la question et brève narration'. This and other interpretations[19] overlook two factors

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[16] For such a view on *agōnes*, cf. Riedweg (n. 4), 31 on *Hecuba*.

[17] The text of *Alcestis* is taken from J. Diggle's Oxford Classical Text of Euripides (vol. 1, Oxford, 1984); the translation is D. Kovacs's, from *Euripides: Cyclops, Alcestis, Medea* (Cambridge, MA, 1994).

[18] Duchemin (n. 1), 179 n. 2.

[19] E.g. F. Solmsen, *Intellectual Experiments of the Greek Enlightenment* (Princeton, 1975), 25; Lloyd (n. 1), 38.

that diminish the neatness of these divisions: first, νέωι γέρων ὤν already constitutes part of the argumentation. Second, the line of thought does not stop in line 635; what seems to be the introduction of the key idea is no more than the stating of the premise. The rhetorical interpretation commonly fails to see the significance of οὐκ ἦσθ' ἄρ' in line 636:[20] this is not the start of a line of argument but an inference from the speech so far.[21] The idea that Pheres owed Admetus to die is not the end and aim of the argumentation but only a stage in the development of the thought. The conclusion instead concerns the relationship between Admetus and his parents, who count as parents no more, and that point is repeated several times. The argument about why Pheres should have died is peripheral in comparison. There is no explicit chain of reasoning, but we have to join the elements of the thought process that are scattered across the speech: 1) Pheres is older than Admetus (635, 643); hence, it would be appropriate for him to die instead of his son (633, 648–9, 660–1); possible exceptions to this rule are dismissed as inapplicable in 653–60. 2) Pheres has refused to die (despite point 1); thus he is a coward (642–4). 3) The one person who dies for Admetus is to be regarded as his parent; therefore, Alcestis is in that position (646–7), Pheres is not.

What is perhaps even more damaging to Admetus' case is that he undermines it by what looks like serious rhetorical blunders. These are partly absurd and damage Admetus' cause to the degree that commentators have gone to some lengths to explain them away.

Let us first take the statement that Pheres owed his son his death as χάρις,[22] on account of Admetus' past behaviour as a respectful son (658–61). Leaving aside that Admetus' demand for Pheres' life in return for his earlier respect may seem disproportionate: he inverts the usual trope of the son owing his parents τροφεῖα, that is, care in old age in return for giving birth and raising him;[23] he turns his respect for his parents, which should be the actual χάρις, into the basis of his own claim for χάρις.

Admetus gives more cause to impugn his judgement or his rhetorical ability when he maintains that he is a suppositious child (638–9, quoted above). If taken literally, this statement severely undermines his own position, and modern readers rightly doubt it.[24] It is made on the spur of the moment and forgotten instantaneously: for how

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[20] Duchemin (n. 1), 179 n. 2 speaks simply of 'sarcasmes' that precede the argument proper (down to line 647). Lloyd (n. 1), 38 identifies 'two interlaced ideas': that the two elderly people do not have much time left (as touched on in line 635) and that Alcestis replaces them as Admetus' father and mother. He does not comment on their place in the overall argumentation.

[21] R. Kühner and B. Gerth, *Ausführliche Grammatik der griechischen Sprache, II: Satzlehre* (Hanover and Leipzig, 1898³), 1.146; J.D. Denniston, *Greek Particles* (Oxford, 1954²), 36; C.M.J. Sicking and J.M. van Ophuijsen, *Two Studies in Attic Particle Usage. Lysias and Plato* (Leiden, 1993), 136; E. van Emde Boas, A. Rijksbaron, L. Huitink and M. de Bakker, *The Cambridge Grammar of Classical Greek* (Cambridge, 2019), 685–6.

[22] Modern interpreters have not taken particular note of this argument. The exception is M. Padilla, 'Gifts of humiliation: *charis* and tragic experience in *Alcestis*', *AJPh* 121 (2000), 179–211, at 197, who undertakes an 'ethical-sociological reading' of the entire play from the point of view of χάρις relationships; his reading of the *agōn* comes closest to the one proposed here. However, he approaches the scene from a socio-historical angle rather than from a communicative-pragmatic one.

[23] Cf. e.g. Eur. *Supp.* 361–4.

[24] M. Griffith, 'Euripides *Alkestis* 636–641', *HSPh* 82 (1978), 83–6; L.P.E. Parker, *Euripides Alcestis* (Oxford, 2007), on 636–9 more appropriately speaks of 'furious irony'. Jakob (n. 9 [1999]), 280 appears to understand Admetus' claim as serious, dignified by Pheres with a response. G.-A. Seeck, *Euripides Alkestis* (Berlin, 2008), on lines 636–41 tries to salvage it but at the cost of failing to recognize the imperfect of realization (636 οὐκ ἦσθ' ἄρ'; cf. n. 21 above) and by misinterpreting Admetus as stating that he was treated *like* (not *as*) a suppositious child.

could Admetus accuse Pheres of being a coward if Pheres did not believe that he was his real son? It is equally bizarre when Admetus declares that he will henceforth treat Alcestis as his parent and become her carer in old age, her γηροτρόφος (668)—the very woman who relinquished growing old in favour of Admetus and hence has no need of a carer. Given that her corpse is lying on stage, Admetus' choice of words seems to run counter to his intentions.[25]

In short, as a debate contribution the speech exhibits serious deficiencies in structure and argumentation (if rhetorical theory is our yardstick). It would, however, be foolish to deny that the speech is powerful overall and has a strong rhetorical effect. The 'mistakes' in the speech will have to be accounted for in other ways.

Significantly, Pheres in his reply first denounces the tone of his son's attack before he addresses the issue (*Alc*. 675–80):

ὦ παῖ, τίν' αὐχεῖς, πότερα Λυδὸν ἢ Φρύγα   675
κακοῖς ἐλαύνειν ἀργυρώνητον σέθεν;
οὐκ οἶσθα Θεσσαλόν με κἀπὸ Θεσσαλοῦ
πατρὸς γεγῶτα γνησίως ἐλεύθερον;
ἄγαν ὑβρίζεις καὶ νεανίας λόγους
ῥίπτων ἐς ἡμᾶς οὐ βαλὼν οὕτως ἄπει.   680

Son, whom do you imagine you are berating with insults, some Lydian or Phrygian slave of yours, bought with money? Do you not know that I am a freeborn Thessalian, legitimately begotten of a Thessalian father? You go too far in insult, and since you hurl brash words at me, you will not get off with impunity.

Then, however, he starts an argumentation that is as perspicuous as Admetus' was blurry. He refutes the assertion that he had the obligation to die for his son (681–93), since there was no such νόμος anywhere in Greece. He supports his claim with several subsidiary arguments responding to Admetus' points: each individual is responsible for himself (685–6 against the idea of an obligation); he has already done everything for Admetus that he is supposed to (661–2 against the argument on χάρις); and he too loves life (against the notion that an old life is worth little). From 694 on, Pheres denies Admetus the right to accuse him since he himself is liable to the same accusation. In this way, the argument on the substance (whether he had to die) is followed by the argument that Admetus is unqualified to raise accusations against him.

In the end, he threatens to retaliate any slander from Admetus in the same manner (704–5). With these words, and with the fact that the refutation of Admetus is framed by a discussion of the tone of his son's words, he makes clear that his sharp speech is primarily retaliation.

Pheres' final self-referential remark on the circumstances of his speech already leads the way to a pragmatic consideration of the scene. But first, let us recapitulate. The two speeches differ considerably with regard to the cogency of their argumentation: Pheres displays σαφήνεια of the highest order. By contrast, Admetus showers his father with spiteful remarks.

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[25] Commentators tend to deflect from the problematic statement or deny that Admetus intends to express what he says. A.M. Dale, *Euripides Alcestis* (Oxford, 1954), on line 668: 'Admetus speaks in legalistic terms'; similarly Seeck (n. 24), on line 668; Conacher (n. 12), on line 668: 'the high-point in the bitter unconscious [!] irony of Admetus' speech' (similarly Conacher [n. 5], 8). For Parker's (n. 24) correct, though rather condensed, interpretation, see n. 42 below.

What is common to both speeches is that the controversial point takes up less than half of their length. Pheres spends thirteen out of thirty-one lines on the question of his death. In Admetus' speech the count is more difficult owing to the unclear structure, but his future relationship with his parents and the mockery at the end, of old people who wish to continue their pitiable existence, take up space and make the speech considerably longer than Pheres' reply.

In addition, the winner of the debate can hardly be determined, for everything hinges on one debatable premise: for Admetus, old age means that one has little to lose. His conclusions are all drawn from the difference in the years remaining to him and Pheres respectively. He does not discuss the underlying problems—if one life is worth more than another and, if so, which criteria tell us which one—but simply posits the answers,[26] while Pheres bluntly rejects the link between lifespan and worthiness.

The argument has been accepted by a series of scholars. The external evidence that they draw from popular morality,[27] however, will not help to establish the winner of the debate: the scenario is fictitious and constructed in a way so as to transcend the challenges one may face in reality,[28] with the possibility of deciding over life and death and with a degree of responsibility that is unrealistic and for which no norm has been established.

The answer to a more abstract phrasing of the question—can one individual legitimately demand the sacrifice of another?—would be obscured by a multiplicity of interests and values that are difficult to weigh. While self-sacrifices for the benefit of the community are lauded as acts of great virtue,[29] it is not clear whether an individual can demand to benefit from such an act. It is, after all, the voluntary nature of such a death that turns the martyrs into role models. Rhetoric can only present the respective cases in the best possible way; it itself cannot determine the truth or value of the case at hand.

Above all, even if it were possible in theory to deduce from an *agōn* an answer to the question whether Pheres should have died, the *agōn* in *Alcestis* is not a suitable example,[30] as it does not present the best possible argument for each side. One might decide which speaker won the debate, but, as Lévrier puts it, 'Il n'en moins vrai que le vainqueur n'est pas celui dont la cause était la meilleure, mais qui a su le mieux faire valoir ses arguments.'[31] There is, however, not even agreement on who that winner is.

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[26] Moreover, he does not take into account that not simply one of two people had to die but that one person was bound to die and the other made the free choice whether instead to take on that fate himself. The hurdle to accept his own death is surely higher for Pheres under these circumstances.

[27] Adduced, for example, by C.M.J. Sicking, 'Admetus' case', in id., *Distant Companions. Selected Papers* (Leiden, 1998), 48–62 (Dutch original: 'Euripides' *Alkestis*', *Lampas* 2 [1969], 38–48), at 52 and Jakob (n. 9 [1999]), 281, who, since no relevant law exists, postulates that Pheres' sacrifice would have been 'eine Sache des Herzens und der Solidarität' within the family.

[28] Cf. P. Riemer, *Die Alkestis des Euripides. Untersuchungen zur tragischen Form* (Frankfurt, 1989), 150–1.

[29] The instances occur in myths but are treated as exemplary (e.g. Lycurg. *Leoc.* 99–101); E. Flaig, 'Amnestie und Amnesie in der griechischen Kultur. Das vergessene Selbstopfer für den Sieg im athenischen Bürgerkrieg 403 v. Chr.', *Saeculum* 42 (1991), 129–49, at 133–6 states that the only historical cases are Leonidas at Thermopylae and the seer in Piraeus at 403.

[30] Dale's statement ([n. 25], xxv) that Pheres is 'hardly the mouthpiece of truth' can easily be transferred to Admetus; similarly Parker (n. 24), on lines 614–738.

[31] J.-L. Lévrier, 'De la rhétorique de la situation au topique de la situation: l'exemple d'*Alceste*', *Pallas* 37 (1991), 61–77, at 67.

II. A PRAGMATIC READING

It has become clear that the attempts to read the scene as a rhetorical duel designed to help us assess the justification of Admetus' claim is bound to fail. Along with the possibility to judge in this matter, we lose a cardinal factor in the assessment of his character. One may dislike his way of arguing with his father, but it is insufficient ground to pronounce him unworthy of the recovery of his wife. Hence asking whether he was right to demand Pheres' death and whether he ought to have declined Alcestis' offer may be missing the point, especially since the second question, in particular, is of little importance in the rest of the play.[32] And since the decision is irreversible, the argument is futile and the debate bound to be inconsequential. Whatever the result of the debate, the winner can do no more than revel in being right.

In this section, I propose an approach to the text that turns away from questions of substance. Instead, I read the scene in a pragmatic way, as a piece of communication, that is, an action that consists of and is constituted by verbal acts. Defining pragmatics is an arduous task, as is distinguishing it from rhetoric in specific cases.[33] In the following, I focus on the literal meaning of the name and consider Pheres' and Admetus' utterances as speech acts.[34] This means that I shall look at how the two participants, in Austin's famous terms, 'do things with words'. I shall ask what Admetus is 'doing', what the illocutionary force of his speech is and how we can infer that from the way in which he speaks.

a) Admetus' speech

The pragmatic reading of Admetus' speech can build on the rhetorical analysis: what seemed odd for a debate contribution will provide the clues as to the purpose of the speech. As we have seen, Admetus' reasoning does not stop at the idea that Pheres had to give up his life, but he arrives at the conclusion that he is no longer to be viewed as Pheres' but as Alcestis' son. This idea is not only the terminal point of the chain of arguments, but it is also repeated four times in the course of the speech in different ways, in such a manner that it forms the end of almost every line of thought: in lines 636–41 it is taken literally, after the reproach that Pheres' pity was belated; in lines 646–7, attached to the accusation that Pheres was a coward, it is expressed in terms

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[32] That the parents' sacrifice would have been appropriate is said only by Alcestis in lines 290–4 (the refusal as such is mentioned several times); Admetus' acceptance is never questioned: cf. Lesky (n. 7), 289; L. Bergson, 'Randbemerkungen zur *Alkestis* des Euripides', *Eranos* 83 (1985), 9–22, at 18; Kurczyk (n. 9), 16 stresses that Admetus deliberately accepts it, but that does not mean that he had a choice.

[33] For a balanced view of this thorny subject, cf. F. Piazza, 'L'arte retorica: antenata o sorella della pragmatica?', *Esercizi Filosofici* 6 (2011), 116–32. For the present purposes, I consider the rules about the artful arrangement of language to the end of convincing (or persuading) an audience of something as rhetoric, and the description of the mechanisms by which language interacts with its (linguistic and extra-linguistic) context as pragmatics.

[34] With many aspects of pragmatics this paper will only deal in passing. Many advances have been made in this field in the last two decades: e.g. L. Schuren, *Shared Storytelling in Euripidean Stichomythia* (Leiden, 2015); A. Bonifazi, A. Drummen and M. de Kreij, *Particles in Ancient Greek Discourse. Five Volumes Exploring Particle Use across Genres* (Washington, DC, 2016), http://chs.harvard.edu/CHS/article/display/6391 (accessed 16 November 2020); E. van Emde Boas, *Language and Character in Euripides'* Electra (Oxford, 2017); G. Martin, F. Iurescia, S. Hof and G. Sorrentino (edd.), *Pragmatic Approaches to Drama. Studies in Communication on the Ancient Stage* (Leiden, 2020). Their work could further strengthen the analysis, but I consider the aspects raised here to be sufficient to make my case.

of moral rightness: the roles of father and mother are ἐνδίκως taken by Alcestis; and in lines 665–8, after Admetus had stressed that he had fulfilled his duties as a son and announced that he would cease to do so, Admetus uses the language of alliances (658 προύδωκας). At the end Admetus addresses the hypothetical course of events (666 τέθνηκα γὰρ δὴ τοὐπὶ σ᾽) and couches the break in terms of social obligations, stating that he will be Alcestis', not his parents', carer in old age.

The key idea of the speech, then, in which the individual motifs converge is not Pheres' obligation but the relationship between father and son. The speech is not argumentative or persuasive in the sense that it states a disagreement and proves a certain point. Instead, it draws the consequence of the insurmountable gap between them and declares to Pheres that their relationship is no longer valid. Admetus thus carries out a social act (a second one, after rejecting the grave offering), even using a quasi-performative speech act. By saying καί μ᾽ οὐ νομίζω παῖδα σὸν πεφυκέναι, Admetus dissolves the relationship, as if he were saying 'I renounce my relationship with you';[35] this declaration validates itself and does not even require a reply (as a true debate would).

As soon as the character of the speech is recognized, its structure becomes more perspicuous. The very passages that Duchemin's analysis along classical categories classified as departures from the canonical disposition[36] become crucial in that they provide the starting point for the new interpretation: in the first (636–47) Admetus claims that he must really be a slave's child because Pheres is unwilling and not brave enough to die, and in the second (662–8) he sarcastically challenges his parents to beget a new son and carer.

Thus what seemed to be digressions are in fact the places where the core message is told. It is the speech's extratextual effect that carries the most weight. It is at the same time the fulfilment of an earlier promise to Alcestis (336–9):

οἴσω δὲ πένθος οὐκ ἐτήσιον τὸ σὸν
ἀλλ᾽ ἔστ᾽ ἂν αἰὼν οὑμὸς ἀντέχηι, γύναι,
στυγῶν μὲν ἥ μ᾽ ἔτικτεν, ἐχθαίρων δ᾽ ἐμὸν
πατέρα· λόγωι γὰρ ἦσαν οὐκ ἔργωι φίλοι.

I shall mourn you not a year only but as long as my life shall last, hating her who bore me and loathing my father. For their love was in word, not deed.

The illocutionary effect of Admetus' speech is, however, not exhausted with the rejection of his parents and the implementation of his promise: I shall argue that his intention is even more hostile, in that the speech itself is an act of verbal aggression against Pheres.

Dubischar classes the scene as an *Abrechnungsagon*. For him, this label denotes that we are dealing with an *ex post*-debate about the contentious issue, but it is still a debate about who is right (*Abrechnung* in the sense of 'accounting', balancing the pros and cons).[37] But in *Alcestis* (and not just there) we could reinterpret the term as '*agōn* of reckoning', which does better justice to the verbal act performed: by means of words

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[35] In analogy to the classic example of the performative: 'I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*', in J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. J.O. Urmson and M. Sbisà (Cambridge, MA, 1962²), 5.
[36] '[S]arcasmes' and 'menaces' respectively: Duchemin (n. 1), 179 n. 2.
[37] Dubischar (n. 1 [2001]), especially 58: 'Im Zentrum steht beim Abrechnungsagon die Frage nach der moralischen Bewertung der ἀδικία.'

Admetus pays back, so to speak, the sorrow that he feels he has suffered in the wake of Pheres' refusal. His aim (and his speech act) is hurting Pheres as much as he can.[38] He does not spell this intention out, but his aim as well as his success can be gauged from the reactions of his intra-dramatic audience:[39] the chorus asks him to stop provoking his father (674 πατρὸς δὲ μὴ παροξύνῃς φρένας), and Pheres characterizes the speech as αὐχεῖν (675) and ὑβρίζειν (679), which conveys the notion. So in the end Admetus can suggest that Pheres was hurt by hearing the truth (708–9 εἰ δ' ἀλγεῖς κλύων τἀληθές).

The bits of the speech that appeared counterproductive to the aim of persuasion make perfect sense in this interpretation: for the emotional impact of the speech, the potential to touch on the addressee's sore spots is more important than logical coherence; to hurt Pheres, Admetus need not restrict himself to sustainable assertions. Hence he can describe himself as a supposititious child, even a slave's son (638–40): for his purpose it is irrelevant that by declaring himself a changeling he could undermine his own position.[40] He concentrates on the hurt caused to Pheres, and the insult against his father warrants the use of the trope.

The other passage that commentators have struggled to explain is Admetus' self-characterization as γηροτρόφος of the dead Alcestis.[41] Again, this paradoxical statement becomes comprehensible if the aim is inflicting pain on Pheres. Admetus does not so much express what he is going to do for Alcestis—his intention is not to depict himself as a virtuous person—nor is it a Freudian slip that reveals his true character; instead, he goes to some length to make Pheres feel what he is missing out on:[42] the prospect of losing his only son, his carer and protector, will inflict on him the hurt meant by Admetus. He aggravates the remark by mockingly encouraging Pheres and his wife to father other sons who could take on Admetus' role (662–4): as a Greek with two grandchildren, Pheres would typically be over sixty years old and his wife hardly younger than fifty. Admetus is therefore ridiculing them, not making a realistic suggestion. The ironic politeness[43] of the potential in οὐκέτ' ἂν φθάνοις (662) must be similarly interpreted as mockery.

The last lines of the speech are designed to send Pheres off on a particularly stinging note. Admetus rebukes the old generation in general for their lack of consistency: on the

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[38] Mastronarde (n. 5), 227–8 sees in Admetus' attacks an overreaction that contributes to his characterization and illustrates how 'the self-propelling impulse to articulate a position clearly and strongly produces the opposite result'. By now, my reservations against the description of the speech as 'clear' will have become obvious, and I would read Admetus' strong language as deliberate; but more crucially, Mastronarde regards the point of disagreement as Admetus' primary concern.

[39] For the notion, see Eur. *Med.* 525 στόμαργος γλωσσαλγία; for the necessity of emic assessment of purposeful impoliteness in modern languages, cf. R.J. Watts, *Politeness* (Cambridge, 2003), especially 8–12.

[40] This trope is known from comedy and oratory. There, however, it is regularly employed to deprecate the opponent: cf. P.J. Wilson, 'Demosthenes 21 (*Against Meidias*): democratic abuse', *PCPhS* 37 (1992), 164–95, at 185–6.

[41] Cf. n. 25 above.

[42] See Parker (n. 24), on lines 666–8: Admetus thinks 'of what he will *not* do for Pheres, not of what he *will* do for Alcestis'. Care in old age and after death is one of the main motives for having children: cf. Isae. 2.10 (on adoption) with L. Rubinstein, *Adoption in IV. Century Athens* (Copenhagen, 1993), 62–76.

[43] On the polite ('urbanen') *potentialis*, see Kühner and Gerth (n. 21), 1.233. For similar uses of the mood, cf. Eur. *Alc.* 72, *Ion* 1299, *Or.* 936. We may speak of incongruous or over-politeness that has the opposite effect: cf. J. Culpeper, M. Haugh and V. Sinkeviciute, '(Im)politeness and mixed messages', in J. Culpeper, M. Haugh and D. Kádár (edd.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Linguistic (Im)Politeness* (London, 2017), 323–55.

one hand, they complain about the misery of their age; on the other hand, they cling to their own lives (669–72). The scorn for the parents' will to live and the cool impersonal gnomic form of this observation produce a cruel climax, and we must read the statement as the last zinger against Pheres.

Even sections that formed parts of the argumentation can be described as contributing to the insult. First, the reproach that Pheres refused to die even though it would (in Admetus' view) have been appropriate entails the accusation of moral failure and a lack of χάρις. Second, the charge of cowardice is a common form of personal invective.

However, the presence of a topos of the *genus demonstrativum* should not take us back to a rhetorical angle and towards regarding the speech as an invective piece that must be dissected with the tools of school rhetoric. On the contrary, it is the differences from the rhetorical practice that are important: for, the theory of the *genus demonstrativum* presupposes an audience before whom a person is praised or vituperated. A person is elevated within a group or disparaged and excluded from it. In *Alcestis*, by contrast, disparaging (or ὑβρίζειν) is just one technique among others to hurt Pheres. Moreover, Admetus does not (primarily) address the internal or the external audience (the chorus and the spectators respectively) to reduce Pheres' prestige with them but Pheres directly. Above all, the social exclusion works in the opposite direction, since Pheres is not excluded from the group but Admetus withdraws from it: not only does he break with his parents, but in the scene where he promises this break to Alcestis he also renounces any participation in communal events in Pherai and commits to complete social isolation (343–7).

In this way, the pragmatic reading captures the social dimension of the speech, which is difficult to describe in purely rhetorical terms. Taken as a double speech act of declaration and insult, Admetus' seemingly unfocussed and partly puzzling remarks gain in poignancy and form a coherent act of aggression against Pheres that actually adapt rather well to the purpose of the speech.

b) Pheres' speech

What Admetus' speech is lacking in clarity and cold reasoning, Pheres' speech has in abundance. A look at the communicative situation again helps to identify Pheres' aims: he arrives as Alcestis' corpse is being brought away for burial. He acts as one might expect of a father-in-law at a bereavement call: he condoles and intends to hand over grave offerings. In addition, he praises the character of the deceased and mentions her service to himself, in that she allowed him not to spend his last days sonless.[44] Pheres thus approaches without rancour or ill intention: there is no indication of tensions between the two men. If one assumes there were, Pheres is obviously on a conciliatory mission.[45]

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[44] The same tropes of consolation (i.e. sharing one's grief and the appreciation of the deceased) occur in lines 369–70; cf. J.H.K.O. Chong Gossard, 'Mourning and consolation in Greek tragedy: the rejection of comfort', in H. Baltussen (ed.), *Greek and Roman Consolations. Eight Studies of a Tradition and its Afterlife* (Swansea, 2013), 37–66, at 52. On the fond memory of the dead and the necessity of endurance (616–17) as tropes of consolatory literature, cf. H.-T. Johann, *Trauer und Trost. Eine quellen- und strukturanalytische Untersuchung der philosophischen Trostschriften über den Tod* (Munich, 1968), 49, 137–8; M.G. Ciani, 'La *consolatio* nei tragici greci. Elementi di un topos', *BIFG* 2 (1975), 89–129.
[45] It is mentioned that Admetus was turned down by his father and mother (15–16, 290, 338–9, 466–70), partly with unequivocal disapproval. The start of the scene passes over these difficulties, as if the relationship had soured only with Alcestis' death.

Instead of the preferred answer (pragmatically speaking),[46] viz. the acceptance of the condolences and the offerings, Admetus utters a brusque rejection and breaks his ties with his parents. This insult calls for an appropriate reaction from Pheres.[47] Admetus has changed the type of conversation to a declaration combined with a quarrel,[48] and Pheres' response matches that new character: his retaliation provokes and attacks, and in that it outdoes Admetus' effort. The pair of speeches show a 'capping' manoeuvre rather than the pros and cons of a debate.[49] However, Pheres' tactics differ in that he cold-bloodedly sticks with the rules of classical rhetoric. He weaponizes the clear structure of his speech, demonstrating the superiority of his cause by showing his ability to bring his arguments in an exemplary form.

One by one he rejects the accusations on the obligation to die and return Admetus' χάρις and on the value of lives, neutralizing the attacks against his own actions. But rather than just parrying Admetus' attacks, he switches to the attacking mode and describes Admetus' obligation to die as at least as binding as his own. He thereby hits Admetus' most sensitive spot: his responsibility for his wife's death. Given Admetus' excessive mourning about Alcestis (890, 903–11) and his later realization (940 ἄρτι μανθάνω) that his life from now on will be more of a pain than a chance for him, the idea that he had a choice is deeply offensive. That idea—that is, that Admetus could have refused Alcestis' sacrifice—is not brought up anywhere else in the play, and we are not invited by the author to view it as a realistic choice (moreover, it would mean declining an offer by Apollo). So the motif in the mouth of Pheres is once again not to be regarded as a fact but as an overstatement used to hurt Admetus.[50] Pheres even doubles down by suggesting that Admetus had thought of a 'clever trick' (699 σοφῶς ἐφηῦρες): he could secure himself immortality if he went on marrying and letting his wives die for him in eternity (699–701). Again, he does presumably not mean to indicate a real option but to distress by rubbing salt into Admetus' wound. He taunts Admetus no less than Admetus had done to him. The threat at the end of his speech (704–5) to respond to Admetus' aggression and speak the unflattering truth about his son (ἀκούσῃ πολλὰ κοὐ ψευδῆ κακά) only spells out what he has done all along to Admetus in his speech. In the stichomythia, the two will not advance new arguments but continue with the quarrel-like mutual offence and put into practice Pheres' threat with increasing intensity:[51] Admetus scolds his father for his cowardice

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[46] That is, the response that the speaker expects to receive (e.g. question–answer or salute–responding salute): cf. S.C. Levinson, *Pragmatics* (Cambridge, 1983), 332–45.

[47] Cf. e.g. Kullmann (n. 12), 141: 'Pheres wird von Admet zu seinen Ausfällen provoziert', but he continues: 'dekuvriert aber dann seinen niedrigen Charakter'.

[48] The quarrel could be defined as a dispute (i.e. a not consensus- or persuasion-oriented form of controversy) with open hostility. On the characteristics of disputes, cf. G. Fritz, 'Controversies', in A. Jucker and I. Taavitsainen (edd.), *Historical Pragmatics. Handbook of Pragmatics*, vol. 8 (Berlin and New York, 2010), 451–81, at 460; for a content-focussed survey of Greek controversies, cf. G. Lloyd, 'Towards a taxonomy of controversies and controversiality. Ancient Greece and China', in M. Dascal and H. Chang (edd.), *Traditions of Controversy* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 2007), 3–15.

[49] Seminal on 'capping' in Greece is D. Collins, *Master of the Game. Competition and Performance in Greek Poetry* (Cambridge, MA and London, 2004). On the parallel (or fusion) of capping techniques and rhetorical contest in Aristophanes' *Knights*, cf. J. Hesk, 'Combative capping in Aristophanic comedy', *CCJ* 53 (2007), 124–60, at 148–9. One might speak, more generally, of insult and counter-insult as an 'adjacency pair' of conversation analysis.

[50] E.g. Jakob (n. 9 [2010]), 18: 'Euripides is indifferent to the events of the past'; cf. n. 32 above.

[51] Schwinge (n. 13), 35–9.

and greed for life; Pheres claims his right to live, blames Admetus for Alcestis' death
and calls her a fool (for sacrificing herself for her undeserving husband).

   To conclude, the reinterpretation of the communicative situation explains the
peculiarities of the speeches and the dynamics of the entire scene. It adds the relational
to the content level of the altercation: the focus of the scene then shifts from the
negotiation about the rightness of the positions to the new relationship between the
participants. In this way, the interpretation proposed here (which could be extended
to other *agōnes*) accounts for the strong presence of rhetorical, specifically invective,
elements despite the fact that the speeches are not themselves invectives. It also replaces
the search for the position backed by the playwright with the priority of the (verbal)
action: if we turn our attention from the arguments that the speakers present to the
agōn as an interaction, it becomes clear how much of the scene is defined by the
situation and the specific constellation of the actors, and its significance is seen in a
new light. Although the argument remains undecided and has no impact on the action,
it has a function for the plot: it exemplifies a change of attitudes that has taken place as
the play has progressed.

III. PLOT AND MYTH

The *agōn* having no impact on the action is a common feature in Euripides.[52] The
Alcestis takes the matter one step further, as there is not even a theoretical chance
that the *agōn* might change the course of events. Pheres' refusal to die cannot be
reversed; Alcestis is dead, whereas Admetus has survived. As long as one assumes
that arguments of the *agōn* provide material for the interpretation, this fact remains
something of an embarrassment. Looking at the pragmatic element of the interaction,
by contrast, we find a good reason for it: Euripides arranges his *agōn* in such a way
that, even if a clear winner emerged, this would make no difference. It simply does
not matter if one has better arguments than the other. Instead, the intransigence itself
of the two and their conduct towards each other become issues. The weaknesses in
Admetus' argumentation cease to signal weaknesses in his position within the plot
and to have an impact on judgements on his character and actions. Instead, they assume
a function within the speech and provide a key to the wider significance of the scene, as
the verbal interaction elucidates his acts on the social level. To explore this aspect of the
myth is, as far as we can tell, Euripides' own innovation.

   And thus we arrive at the myth and its arrangement in the play. The story of Alcestis
is one manifestation of a motif that can be found all over the world.[53] In what seems to
be its archetypical form, a bridegroom is doomed to die on his wedding day, but he is
allowed to continue his life if another person gives theirs. He is turned down first by his
father, then his mother, but then his bride agrees to sacrifice herself. Versions of the
story closely resembling this archetype (and containing characters called Admetus
and Alcestis) are known from ancient Greece.[54]

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   [52] Lloyd (n. 1), 16–17.
   [53] A. Lesky, *Alkestis, der Mythus und das Drama* (Vienna, 1925); G. Megas, 'Die Sage von
Alkestis', *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft* 30 (1933), 1–33.
   [54] Apollod. *Bibl.* 1.105–6. Phrynichus adapted the plot in his (satyr?) play *Alcestis* (*TrGF* 3 F
1c–2). However, our knowledge of this play is limited. It is unclear whether Euripides himself
introduced Heracles as the saviour of Alcestis. D.J. Conacher, *Euripidean Drama. Myth, Theme*

Euripides is generally agreed to have made at least two important changes. The first concerns the timeline: he gave up the concentration on one day, interposing an unspecified but substantial delay between the announcement of Admetus' premature death and Alcestis' decision on the one hand and the day of her death (the day of the play) on the other. In addition, he detached the story from the wedding, as Euripides' Alcestis had already born children when she offered her life.[55]

The other change is the addition of the *agōn*, a second meeting between Admetus and Pheres. The first time the two speak, Admetus' appeal to his parents to die for him (as present in the *Ur-myth*), is mentioned several times,[56] but, owing to Euripides' rearrangement, it falls outside of the dramatic timeframe. The playwright compensates its elimination by means of the new *agōn*. However, it is the deferral to after the decision that gives the dialogue its particular character: Admetus no longer fights for his life. The question of whether he can persuade Pheres loses its relevance for the course of events, and the consequences of Alcestis' death and how he copes with his responsibility for it become central. So the focus is on his actions in the new situation: him renouncing his kinship ties with Pheres is, as has been mentioned, the fulfilment of a promise Alcestis had not even asked for. The audience observes the consequences of Admetus' grief for the reality of the play: while he has previously only talked about it, Admetus is isolating himself here from his environment; the loss of his wife leads to him giving up social relations.

This also makes the rest of his promise credible: Admetus had vowed in his farewell address not to visit symposia or to have sex anymore (343–52). The fact that his willingness to keep his promises to Alcestis is shown in his conversation with Pheres will be relevant at the end, when he initially refuses to take into his house the veiled woman whom Heracles entrusts to him and backs down only after his friend's sustained insistence.[57] As he hurts Pheres wilfully and beyond what the renouncement inherently entails, it also becomes apparent that he does not just formally keep his promise but that he takes great pains in doing so: he pushes himself into abandoning his entire social environment in which he lived with Alcestis (with the exception of the chorus). The spectators watch him take action in this situation—be it as a result of Alcestis' sacrifice (for example out of a sense of guilt) or because his life has become unbearable.

The changed character of the *agōn* may be the result of the modification of the story, or Euripides' wish to present Admetus' behaviour in the new situation may have led to the rearrangement. It is perhaps futile to wonder which is true. What is certain is that Euripides' restructuring of the myth and the *agōn*'s losing the character of a 'rhetorical

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and Structure (Toronto, 1967), 332 and C. Wildberg, *Hyperesie und Epiphanie. Ein Versuch über die Bedeutung der Götter in den Dramen des Euripides* (Munich, 2002), 17–18 raise doubts about Phrynichus' use of the motif.

[55] Van Lennep (n. 8), 7–8; Parker (n. 24), xiii; Kurczyk (n. 9), 25–6 n. 59.

[56] See n. 45 above. The *Alcestis Barcinonensis*, which otherwise draws many motifs and formulations from Euripides (cf. the parallels listed in M. Marcovich, *Alcestis Barcinonensis. Text and Commentary* [Leiden, 1988]), returns to the traditional presentation and places Admetus' failed entreaties to his parents and Alcestis' decision at the centre of the plot; cf. E. Rossi, 'Una versione tardoantica del mito di Alcesti: l'*Alcesti* di Barcellona', *Dioniso* 1 (2011), 184–211. Patrick Finglass draws my attention to *TrGF* adesp. 701a (in vol. 5/2), which apparently offers part of Pheres' speech rejecting Admetus' request and which, Finglass argues, post-dates the classical era ('Tragicorum Graecorum fragmenta volume 2: old texts, new opportunities', in A. Lamari, F. Montanari and A. Novokhatko [edd.], *Fragmentation in Ancient Greek Drama* [Berlin and Boston, 2020], 165–82, at 172–5).

[57] Cf. Conacher (n. 12), 46–7; Seeck (n. 24), 39–40.

contest' (that is, its persuasive function) are interdependent. Rearranging the story and omitting an important part of the traditional folktale results in the shift of focus from the moral issue (the relative value of a life) to the social aspects and the description of a man dealing with an extreme situation. This shift may be typical for Euripides, whose *œuvre* displays, in the words of Martin Hose, 'eine Ansammlung von *homines sociologici* […], deren Beziehungen zueinander, sei es im Rahmen des griechischen Oikos, sei es im Rahmen der griechischen Polis, den Stoff für Konflikte liefern'.[58]

The *agōn* of *Alcestis* is thus an experiment, the study of a man in a situation that cannot be studied in real life.[59] Admetus realizes far too late what a situation he has put himself into in trying to save his life. In his desperation, he alienates himself from his usual surrounding. The people who are left are friends from outside his circle of Pherans after he has repudiated his closer φίλοι, which include his parents. If Admetus' extreme behaviour is understood in the *agōn* as it has been in other scenes, the question of whether he is right loses much of its bearing on the sympathy for or abhorrence of his character and further limits the possibility of a moral assessment of his attacks on Pheres. Alcestis' return stops his increasing isolation.[60] Whether or not Admetus 'deserves' this redemption, its effect is all the greater if we recognize how much it counteracts his propensities in dealing with his environment.

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[58] M. Hose, *Euripides als Anthropologe* (Munich, 2009), 7.
[59] Cf. L. Bruit Zaidman, 'Mythe et tragédie dans l'*Alceste* d'Euripide', in S. des Bouvrie (ed.), *Myth and Symbol I. Symbolic Phenomena in Ancient Greek Culture. Papers from the First International Symposium on Symbolism at the University of Tromsø, June 4–7, 1998* (Bergen, 2002), 199–214, at 210: 'Admète et avec lui tous les siens, sont des otages, ils sont les instruments d'une expérimentation construite sur une situation inouïe que suggérait le mythe et qu'Admète n'a pas choisie'. The question of the genre of *Alcestis*, I may add, is of little overall relevance for this paper; nothing in the interpretation of the play as a character study jars with its being a tragedy.
[60] As an argument for the fairy tale character of the play, see Jakob (n. 9 [1999]), 283.