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The Alcestiad

A play in three acts

with

A satyr play

The Drunken Sisters

Thornton Wilder

A SAMUEL FRENCH ACTING EDITION

**SAMUEL
FRENCH**
FOUNDED 1830

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NOTE TO NEW EDITION OF *THE ALCESTIAD*

It is a great pleasure to reintroduce *The Alcestiad*, Thornton Wilder's ambitious homage to classical drama, and its satyr play, *The Drunken Sisters*.

THE ALCESTIAD 1938-2014

Thornton Wilder began significant work on this drama in 1938, the same year in which his far more famous *Our Town* and *The Merchant of Yonkers* (later *The Matchmaker*) premiered on Broadway and two years before turning to *The Skin of Our Teeth*, which premiered in 1942. He subtitled the piece "a play of questions."

Many events, including World War II and a lost manuscript, held up completion of *The Alcestiad* until the mid-1950s. On August 22, 1955, the play opened at last at the Edinburgh Festival in Scotland under the title *A Life in the Sun*. The renowned Tyrone Guthrie directed the production that starred celebrated actress Irene Worth in the role of Alcestis. Although the work was popular with audiences, the critics were less than kind and Wilder withdrew its English language rights.

Two years later, on June 27, 1957, now revised, translated into German and including its satyr play for the first time, *Die Alkestiade* had a highly acclaimed rebirth with audiences and critics at the Schauspielhaus in Zürich, Switzerland. Its enormous success here sparked many productions in Germany and Austria, and led to its publication in German in 1960. However, Wilder never again permitted the play to be performed or even published in English.

A notable related chapter in the history of *The Alcestiad* is its operatic version, for which Wilder contributed the libretto. This ambitious work, titled *Alkestiade* and composed by Louise Talma, also premiered in German at the Alta Oper in Frankfurt, Germany, on March 2, 1962.

In 1977, two years after his death, Wilder's estate supported the play's first published appearance in English in a reading edition by Harper & Row (now HarperCollins) titled *The Alcestiad, or A Life in the Sun, A Play in Three Acts with a Satyr Play The Drunken Sisters*. This version drew on both the original English acting script and the published German text. In 1980, employing this version, Samuel French issued the play's first English-language acting edition. The Great Lakes Theater in Cleveland, Ohio, produced the work's first American professional production on August 25, 1984. There have been scattered productions since, among them several notable staged readings by professional companies.

THE 2014 ACTING EDITION

This new acting edition restores the work's original title, which Thornton Wilder always preferred. In this edition, we have included the definitive version of the Note he contributed to the 1955

Edinburgh Festival's souvenir program. (Wilder added a new first paragraph to the original printed text after the Edinburgh opening.) We have also included character descriptions. The original acting and reading editions of *The Alcestiad* were published with forewords by Isabel Wilder, his sister and longtime representative. Interested directors are invited to consult these pieces as well as other material about the history and growing record of scholarship about the play by visiting www.thorntonwilder.com and www.twildersociety.org.

The Drunken Sisters, *The Alcestiad's* satyr play – always a hit with audiences – serves double duty in Wilder's dramatic work. In a slightly longer version it also depicts the sin of Gluttony in his series of short plays devoted to the Seven Deadly Sins. (Listen to a recording of Wilder reading *The Drunken Sisters* in 1962 to a packed audience at an event in Washington, D.C. sponsored by President John F. Kennedy's cabinet on www.thorntonwilder.com.)

“A PLAY OF QUESTIONS”

Wilder's *Alcestiad*, a theatrical banquet of complicated plot lines and emotions, was inspired in part by the author's love and teaching of the Classics at the University of Chicago in the 1930s, as well as his encounters with the works of Franz Kafka and Søren Kierkegaard, post-World War II existentialist thought, and his own experiences as a soldier in that war. But it is helpful to remember that *The play's* roots are found in the same soil as the roots of *The Matchmaker* and *Our Town*. The play's lively and often humorous “*Matchmaker*” side is, in Wilder's words, “a mixture of religious revival, mother-love-dynamite, and heroic daring-do.” When the brave and confused Alcestis returns from the dead, asking large questions about what matters about life and how we lead it, it is not difficult to catch a glimpse of Emily in Act III of *Our Town*. Indeed, we may think of the two plays as sister plays. *Our Town* evokes inspiration and questions about love, life and death in a mythic New England village we can identify with even if we have never been within a thousand miles of New Hampshire. *The Alcestiad* draws on myths and stories that deal with similar issues and themes gifted to us through centuries past, and still surrounding us, whether or not we are aware of them.

The Wilder family and Samuel French are pleased to issue this new acting edition of Wilder's Theatrical Banquet.

Enjoy!

Tappan Wilder
March, 2014

THORNTON WILDER'S NOTE ON *THE ALCESTIAD*

With box office appeal in mind, The Alcestiad opened in Edinburgh with the name A Life in the Sun. To further explain a play that seemed to stand on the other side of the world from a farce like The Matchmaker, Tyrone Guthrie prevailed on Wilder to write a note for the program.

Alcestis chose to die for her husband. We are often told that soldiers die for their country, that reformers and men of science lay down their lives for us. Who commands them? Whence, and how do they receive the command?

The story of Alcestis has been retold many times. When her husband, Admetus, King of Thessaly, was mortally ill, a message came from Apollo saying that he would live if someone volunteered to die in his stead. Alcestis assumes the sacrifice and dies. The mighty Hercules happened to arrive at the palace during the funeral; he descended into the underworld, strove with Death, and brought her back to life. The second act of my play retells this story. There is, however, another legend involving King Admetus. Zeus, the father of gods and men, commanded Apollo to descend to earth and to live for one year as a man among men. Apollo chose to live as a herdsman in the fields of King Admetus. This story serves as the basis of my first act. My third act makes free use of the tradition that Admetus and Alcestis in their old age were supplanted by a tyrant and lived on as slaves in the palace where they had once been rulers.

On one level, my play recounts the life of a woman – of many women – from bewildered bride to sorely tested wife to overburdened old age. On another level it is a wildly romantic story of gods and men, of death and hell and resurrection, of great loves and great trials, of usurpation and revenge. On another level, however, it is a comedy about a very serious matter.

These old legends seem at first glance to be clear enough. One would say that they had been retold for our edification; they are exemplary. Yet on closer view many of them – the stories of Oedipus, of the sacrifice of Isaac, of Cassandra – give the impression of having been retained down the ages because they are ambiguous and puzzling. We are told that Apollo loved Admetus and Alcestis. If so, how strangely he exhibited it. It must make for considerable discomfort to have the god of the sun, of healing and song, housed among one's farm workers. And why should divine love impose on a devoted couple the decision as to which should die for the other? And why (though the question has been asked so many millions of times) should the omnipotent friend permit some noble human beings to end their days in humiliation and suffering?

Following some meditations of Søren Kierkegaard, I have written a comedy about the extreme difficulty of any dialogue between heaven and earth, about the misunderstandings that result from the “incommensurability of things human and divine.” Kierkegaard described God under the image of “the unhappy lover.” If He revealed Himself to us in His glory, we would fall down in abasement, but abasement is not love. If He divested Himself of the divine attributes in order to come nearer to us, that would be an act of condescension. This is a play about how Apollo searched for a language in which he could converse with Admetus and Alcestis and with their innumerable descendants; and about how Alcestis, through many a blunder, learned how to listen and interpret the things that Apollo was so urgently trying to say to her.

Yet I am aware of other levels, and perhaps deeper ones that will only become apparent to me later.

THE ALCESTIAD was first performed with the title *A Life in the Sun* at The Church of Scotland Assembly Hall, The Mound, Edinburgh, on August 22, 1955. It was produced by the Edinburgh Festival Society in association with Tennent Productions Limited and was directed by Tyrone Guthrie, with décor by Tanya Moiseiwitsch. The cast* was as follows:

APOLLO	Michael David
DEATH	John Kidd
FIRST WATCHMAN	Laurence Hardy
ALCESTIS	Irene Worth
AGLAIA	Madeleine Christie
TEIRESIAS	Geoffrey Dunn
BOY	David Gloag
ADMETUS	Robert Hardy
FIRST HERDSMAN	Philip Guard
SECOND HERDSMAN	John Scholan
THIRD HERDSMAN	Peter Fox
FOURTH HERDSMAN	Peter Duguid
HERCULES	Rupert Davies
SECOND WATCHMAN	Peter Bayliss
EPIMENES	Alexander Davion
CHERIANDER	Michael Bates
AGIS	Robert Speaight
FIRST GUARD	Michael Allinson
SECOND GUARD	Timothy Findley
THIRD GUARD	John Greig
FOURTH GUARD	David Saxby
SERVANTS	Jennifer Wright, Mary Wylie
PEOPLE OF THESSALY	William Robertson, John MacDonald, William Lyon Brown, Joyce Allan, Betty Thorburn, Joyce C. Kerr, Ann Tirard, Helena Gloag, Ann Gibson, Peter Smallwood, Pat Magee

*The name of the actress playing Rhodope was inadvertently omitted from the program.

CHARACTERS

APOLLO – God of the Sun

DEATH – God of the Underworld

FIRST WATCHMAN – Night watchman, middle aged, servant to King Admetus

ALCESTIS – Queen of Thessaly

AGLAIA – (pronounced aa-GLUH-aa) An old Nurse

TEIRESIAS – Blind, unbelievably old, irascible, truculent, domineering and very near to senile incoherence

BOY – Servant to Tiresias

ADMETUS – King of Thessaly

FIRST HERDSMAN – A shepherd

SECOND HERDSMAN – A shepherd

THIRD HERDSMAN – A shepherd

FOURTH HERDSMAN – A shepherd

RHODOPE – (pronounced RAH-de-pē) A young girl of the palace of servants

HERCULES – Son of Zeus

SECOND WATCHMAN – Younger than First Watchman; Servant to King Agis

EPIMENES – (pronounced E-pim-E-neeZ) 21, son of Alcestis

CHERIANDER – 21, friend of Epimenes

AGIS – (pronounced AA-jis) Usurping King of Thessaly

FIRST GUARD – Guard of the palace of Agis

SECOND GUARD – Guard of the palace of Agis

THIRD GUARD – Guard of the palace of Agis

FOURTH GUARD – Guard of the palace of Agis

SERVANTS – Servants of the palace of King Admetus and King Agis

PEOPLE OF THESSALY

SETTING

The rear court of the palace of Admetus, King of Thessaly, many centuries before the Great Age of Greece

THE ALCESTIAD

ACT ONE

(No curtain, except at the end of Act III and after The Drunken Sisters. All three acts of The Alcestiad take place in the rear court of the palace of Admetus, King of Thessaly, many centuries before the Great Age of Greece. Each act begins at dawn and ends at sunset of the same day.)

(The palace is a low, squat house of roughly dressed stone, with a flat roof. There is a suggestion of a portico, however, supported by sections of the trunks of great trees. The palace doors are of wood and a gilded ox skull is affixed to each of them. Before these doors is a platform with low steps leading down to the soil floor of the courtyard.)

(The front of the palace fills the left three-quarters of the back of the stage. The rest of the stage is enclosed by clay-brick walls. In the wall to the right is a large wooden gate leading to the road outside and to the city of Pherai. The wall on the left is less high; a small door in it leads to the servants' quarters.)

*(From the front center of the stage a path leads down (descending to the right) to what in a conventional theater would be the orchestra pit. At the bottom of this path is a "grotto"—a spring with practical flowing water; a bronze door to the Underworld, overhung by vines, but large enough for actors to pass through. Here is also [not seen, only assumed] the snake **PYTHO**.)*

(First streaks of dawn.)

*(Gradually a light rises to brilliancy, revealing **APOLLO***

standing on the roof of the palace. He wears a costume of gold with a long dark-blue mantle over his right shoulder. A blue light begins to glow from the entrance to Hell, down by the spring. DEATH – in a garment of large black patches, in which he looks like a bat or a beetle – comes waddling up the path and sniffs at the gate left and at the palace gate.)

(Throughout the scene APOLLO gazes off toward the rising sun – cool, measured, and with a faint smile on his lips.)

APOLLO. *(like a “Good morning”)* Death!

DEATH. Aaah! You are here! The palace of Admetus has an honored guest! We are to have a wedding here today. What a guest! Or have you come to steal the bride away, illustrious Apollo?

APOLLO. Death, you live in the dark.

DEATH. I do, I do. Have you come, Lord Apollo, to show us some great sign, some wonder today?

(The NIGHT WATCHMAN, sounding his rattle and carrying a waxed parchment lantern, comes around the palace, up center stage.)

WATCHMAN. *(singsong)* The watch before dawn, and all is well in the palace of Admetus the Hospitable, King of Thessaly, rich in horses. *(starting to go off left)* Dawn. The day of the wedding – of the greatest of all weddings.

(He exits left into the servants’ quarters.)

DEATH. I was asking, Lord Apollo, if you had come to show us some great wonder. *(pause)* Yes? No? “Yes,” I hope. When the gods come near to men, sooner or later someone is killed. Am I to welcome some admired guest in my kingdom today? Am I to have King Admetus or the Princess Alcestis?

APOLLO. No.

DEATH. I shall watch and hope. *(he waddles to the center)*

In which of your powers and capacities are you here today, may I ask? As healer? *(pause)* As bringer of light and life? *(pause)* As singer?

APOLLO. *(still gazing off; casually)* They are all one and the same. I have come to set a song in motion – a story –

DEATH. A story!

APOLLO. A story that will be told many times...

DEATH. Ah! A lesson! Will there be a lesson in it for me?

APOLLO. Yes.

DEATH. *(beating with his flippers on the ground)* No!

APOLLO. Yes. You are to learn something.

DEATH. *(scuttling about in rage)* No! There is no lesson you can teach me. I am here forever, and I do not change. It's you Gods of the Upper Air that need lessons. And I'll read you a lesson right now. *(shrilly)* Leave these human beings alone. Stay up on Mount Olympus, where you belong, and enjoy yourselves. I've watched this foolishness coming over you for a long time. You made these creatures and then you became infatuated with them. You've thrown the whole world into confusion and it's getting worse every day. All you do is to torment them – who knows better than I? *(He waddles back to the top of the path, shaking himself furiously.)* They will never understand your language. The more you try to say something, the more you drive them distraught.

APOLLO. They have begun to understand me. At first they were like the beasts – more savage, more fearful. Like beasts in a cage, themselves the cage to themselves. Then two things broke on their minds and they lifted their heads: my father's thunder, which raised their fears to awe; and my sunlight, for which they gave thanks. In thanks they discovered speech, and I gave them song. These were signs and they knew them. First one, then another, knew that I prompted their hearts and was speaking.

DEATH. Yes, they're not like they used to be: "Apollo loves

Thessaly. Apollo loves the house of Pherai.” Go back to Olympus, where you belong. All this loving... It’s hard to tell which is the unhappier – you or these wretched creatures. When you try to come into their lives you’re like a giant in a small room: with every movement you break something. And whom are you tormenting today? The King? Or his bride?

APOLLO. You.

DEATH. Me? Me? So you’ve decided to love me, too? No, thank you!

(He flaps all his flippers, scrambles down the path, then scrambles up again.)

(shrilly) You can’t trouble me, and you can’t give me any lessons. I and my Kingdom were made to last forever. How could you possibly trouble me?

APOLLO. You live in the dark and you cannot see that all things change.

DEATH. *(screaming)* Change! There’ll be no change. *(He looks around in apprehension.)* It’s getting light. And this story you’re starting today is about a change? A change for me?

APOLLO. For you and for me.

DEATH. *(disappearing into his cave, with one last sneering scream)* For you!

(The light on APOLLO fades and he disappears. The WATCHMAN returns on his rounds. He shakes his rattle, then blows out the lamp.)

WATCHMAN. Dawn. Dawn. And all is well in the palace of Admetus the Hospitable, King of Thessaly, rich in horses. *(descends toward audience)* It is the day of the wedding, the greatest of all weddings, and all is *not* well. Why can’t she sleep – the princess, the bride, our future queen? Eight, ten times during the night, I’ve found her here – wandering about, looking at the sky. Sometimes she goes out into the road, as

though she were waiting for a messenger. She stands here and raises her arms – whispers: “Apollo! A sign! One sign!” Sign of what? That she is right to marry King Admeteus? Eh! Where will she find clearer signs than those written on his face? Oh, I have lived a long time. I know that a bride can be filled with fears on the night before her wedding. But to be afraid of our Admetus who has won her hand in such a wonderful way that all Greece is amazed. Oh, my friends, take an old watchman’s advice. Don’t meditate upon the issues of life at three in the morning. At that hour no warmth reaches your heart and mind. At that hour – huuu – you see your house in flames and your children stretched out dead at your feet. Wait until the sun rises. The facts are the same – the facts of human life are the same – but the sunlight gives them a meaning. Take the advice of a night watchman. Now I want a drink of water.

(He descends to the spring and greets the snake PYTHO.)

Good day to you, Pytho, old friend. It will be a great day for you, too. You shall have a part in the marriage banquet – a great sheep, or half an ox. Now come! Leave my hands free to make the offering.

(He lets the water slip through his cupped hands. And mumbles the ritual: “You sources of life-earth, air, fire, and water...” Then he scoops once more and drinks. He addresses the audience.)

Look, friends. Do you see this cave under the vines? This is one of the five entrances into Hell, and our good Pytho is here to guard it. No man has ever entered it, and no man has ever come out of it. That’s what it is – merely one of the ten thousand things we do not understand. *(He drinks again. There is a shriek of a slain animal.)* Well, the great day has begun. They are slaughtering the animals for the feast. The cooks are building great fires. The meadows are filled with the

tents of kings and of chiefs who have come to celebrate the wedding of King Admetus, and of the Princess Alcestis, daughter of Pelias, King of Iolcos.

(He starts up the path. ALCESTIS, in white, glides out of the palace doors. Animal cries.)

WATCHMAN. *(cont.)* Hsst! There she is again!

(He hides on the path below the level of the stage.

ALCESTIS comes to the center of the stage, raises her arms, and whispers:)

ALCESTIS. Apollo! A sign! One sign!

(She goes out the gate, right, leading to the road.)

WATCHMAN. *(softly to the audience, mimicking her)* Apollo! One sign!

(animal cries)

(AGLAIA, the old nurse, comes out quickly from the palace. She looks about, sees the WATCHMAN.)

AGLAIA. *(whispers)* Where is the princess?

(he points)

All night – this restlessness, this unhappiness! “Apollo! One sign!”

WATCHMAN. “Apollo! One sign!”

(ALCESTIS comes in from the gate, in nervous decisiveness.)

ALCESTIS. Watchman!

WATCHMAN. Yes, Princess?

ALCESTIS. Find my drivers. Tell them to harness the horses for a journey. Aglaia, call together my maids; tell them to get everything ready.

AGLAIA. A journey, Princess – on your wedding day, a journey?

ALCESTIS. *(who has swept by her; from the palace steps)* Aglaia, I

have no choice in this. I must go. Forgive me. No, hate me; despise me – but finally forget me.

AGLAIA. Princess, the shame – and the insult to King Admetus.

ALCESTIS. I know all that, Aglaia. Aglaia, when I have gone, tell the King – tell Admetus – that I take all the shame; that I do not ask him to forgive me, but to despise me and forget me.

AGLAIA. Princess, I am an old woman. I am no ordinary slave in this house. I nursed the child Admetus and his father before him. (*to the WATCHMAN*) Watchman, leave us alone.

(*exit WATCHMAN*)

You do not know King Admetus. In all Greece and the Islands you would not find a better husband.

ALCESTIS. I know this.

AGLAIA. You will find men who are more warlike, more adventurous, stronger perhaps – but not one more just, more... more beloved.

ALCESTIS. All this I know, Aglaia. I, too, love Admetus. Because of that I am doubly unhappy. But there is One I love more.

AGLAIA. Another? Another man? Above Admetus? Then go, Princess, and go quickly. We have been mistaken in you. You have no business here. If you have no eyes; if you have no mind; if you cannot see – (*harshly*) Watchman! Watchman! Everything will be ready for your journey, Princess. But go quickly.

ALCESTIS. No, Aglaia, not another man. The thing that I love more than Admetus is...is a God. Is Apollo.

AGLAIA. Apollo?

ALCESTIS. Yes. Since a young girl I have had only one wish – to be His priestess at Delphi. (*She despairs of expressing herself. Then suddenly cries, with passion:*) I wish to live in the real. With one life to live, one life to give – not these lives we see about us: fever and pride

and...and possessionship – but in the real; at Delphi, where the truth is.

AGLAIA. But the God has not called you? (*pause*) The God has not sent for you?

ALCESTIS. (*low; in shame*) No.

AGLAIA. And this real – it is not real enough to be the wife of Admetus, the mother of his children, and the Queen of Thessaly?

ALCESTIS. Any woman can be wife and mother; and hundreds have been queens. My husband. My children. To center your life upon these five or six, to be bound and shut in with everything that concerns them... each day filled – so filled – with the thousand occupations that help or comfort them, that finally one sinks into the grave loved and honored, but as ignorant as the day one was born –

AGLAIA. Ignorant?

ALCESTIS. Knowing as little of why we live and why we die – of why the hundred thousand live and die – as the day we were born.

AGLAIA. (*dryly*) And that you think you can learn at Delphi? But the God has not called you.

ALCESTIS. (*in shame*) I sent offerings...messages... offerings... (*pause*) I was my father's favorite daughter. He wished me never to marry, but to remain with him until his death. But suitors came to seek my hand from all Greece. He imposed upon them an impossible task. He required of them that they yoke together a lion and a boar and drive them thrice about the walls of our city of Iolcos. They came from all Greece: Jason came, and Nestor; Hercules, son of Zeus, came; and Atreus. And all failed. Month after month the new suitors failed and barely escaped with their lives. My father and I sat at the city gates and my father laughed. And I smiled – not because I wished to live with my father, but because I wished for only this one thing: to

live and die as a priestess of Apollo at Delphi.

AGLAIA. And then Admetus came. And he drove the lion and the boar – like mild oxen he drove them about the city; and won your hand, Princess.

ALCESTIS. But I loved Apollo more.

AGLAIA. Yes. But it was Apollo who made this marriage.

ALCESTIS. We cannot know that.

AGLAIA. The sign you are asking for, Princess, is before you – the clearest of signs. (*drastically*) You have not been called to Delphi: you cannot read the simplest words of the God.

(**ALCESTIS** shields her face.)

Now listen to what I am telling you: were you not amazed that Admetus was able to yoke together the lion and the boar? Where Atreus failed, and Hercules, son of Zeus? I will tell you how he did it: in a dream, the God Apollo taught him how to yoke together a lion and a boar.

(**ALCESTIS** takes two steps backward.)

First, he saw and loved you. Before he returned to Iolcos that second time – after his first failure – he fell ill. Love and despair brought him to the point of death – and I nursed him. Three nights he lay at the point of death. And the third night, I was sitting beside him – his agony and his delirium – and I heard, I saw, that in a dream Apollo was teaching him to yoke together a lion and a boar.

(**ALCESTIS** gazes at her.)

This is true. I swear it is true.

ALCESTIS. True, yes – but we have heard enough of these deliriums and dreams, fevers and visions. Aglaia, it is time we asked for certainties. The clear open presence of the God – that is at Delphi.

AGLAIA. Clear? Open? Even at Delphi the sibyl is delirious;

she raves; she is beside herself. Who ever heard of them speaking clearly?

ALCESTIS. (*turning with irresolute step toward the palace, in despair*) I am alone, alone...

AGLAIA. (*firmly but affectionately*) Now listen to me, Princess. Go to your room and sleep. (*looking upward*) It is two hours to noon. If, after a little rest, you are still of the same mind, you can go on any journey you want, and no one will try to stop you.

(*Holding ALCESTIS's elbow, she guides her to the palace doors, prattling in maternal fashion.*)

AGLAIA. (*cont.*) You want the gods to speak to us clearly and openly, Princess? What can you be thinking they are, Princess? I hope you don't think of them as men!

(*Both exit into the palace. For a moment the stage is empty. A sound of voices at the gate rises almost to clamor. Pounding and knocking at right. The WATCHMAN comes around the palace upstage center.*)

WATCHMAN. Well, now, what's that? What's all this noise? (*opens the gate and talks through it, ajar*) The wedding guests enter at the gate in front of the palace. This is the rear gate. What? Don't everybody talk at once! What? Very well, very well. Let the old man in.

(*Enter TEIRESIAS, blind, unbelievably old, irascible, truculent, domineering and very near to senile incoherence. One hand is on the shoulder of a BOY who guides him; the other ceaselessly brandishes a great stick. TOWNSPEOPLE follow him into the court, and some SERVANTS come into the court both from the palace doors and from around the palace.*)

TEIRESIAS. (*surprisingly loud and strong*) Is this the palace of Minos, King of Crete?

(*Laughter; the BOY starts pulling his sleeve and whispering into his ear.*)

I mean, is this the palace of Oedipus, King of Thebes?

(striking the BOY with his stick) Stop pulling at me! I know what I'm saying. *(warding off those pressing about him)* Bees, wasps, and hornets!

WATCHMAN. No, old man. This is the palace of Admetus, King of Thessaly.

TEIRESIAS. *(repeating his words)* King of Thessaly. Well, that's what I said. That's what I meant. Call Admetus, King of Thessaly. I have a message for him.

WATCHMAN. Old man, the King is to be married today. He is busy with his guests. You sit here in the sun now; we shall wash your feet. The King will come and hear you later.

TEIRESIAS. *(threatening with his stick)* Marrying...washing. What have I got to do with marrying and washing? I'll not wait a minute. *(stamping)* Call King What's-his-name.

(enter AGLAIA from the palace)

AGLAIA. Who are you, old man? I shall tell the King –

TEIRESIAS. Tell the King that I am Delphi, priest of Teiresias – Apollo, priest of Delphi.... Boy, what is this I'm saying?

(BOY whispers)

Tell the King I am Teiresias, priest of Apollo. That I come from Delphi with a message and that I am in a hurry to go back there.

AGLAIA. You are Teiresias? Teiresias!

WATCHMAN & BYSTANDERS. Teiresias!

TEIRESIAS. *(beating with his stick on the ground)* Call the King! Plague and pestilence! Call King What's-his-name.

AGLAIA. Coming, great Teiresias.

(She is hurrying to the palace door as it opens and ADMETUS comes out. More SERVANTS gather.)

ADMETUS. What is it? Who is this, Aglaia?

AGLAIA. *(confidentially)* It is Teiresias, come from Delphi.

ADMETUS. Teiresias!

AGLAIA. (*points to her forehead*) As old as the mountains,
King Admetus.

ADMETUS. Welcome, welcome, noble Teiresias, my father's
old friend. Welcome to Pherai. I am Admetus, King of
Thessaly.

TEIRESIAS. (*waving his stick*) Back. Stand back. All this
crowding and pushing... Have you ears, fellow?

ADMETUS. Yes, Teiresias.

TEIRESIAS. Then pull the wax out of them and listen to
what the God says.

ADMETUS. They are open, Teiresias.

TEIRESIAS. Atreus, King of Mycenae, hear what the God
says –

ADMETUS. Atreus? Noble Teiresias, I am Admetus, King
of –

TEIRESIAS. Admetus? All right – Admetus, then. Hold
your tongue and let me get my message out. I bring
a message to you from Apollo's temple at Delphi. An
honor, a great honor has come to Thessaly. Boy, is this
Thessaly?

(*He puts hands on the BOY's head; the BOY nods.*)

A great honor and a great peril has come to Thessaly.

ADMETUS. A peril, Teiresias?

TEIRESIAS. An honor and a peril. A peril is an honor, fool.
No – an honor is a peril. Don't you know the first
things up here in Thessaly?

ADMETUS. One moment, Teiresias. A message to me is also
a message to my future queen. Aglaia, call the princess.

(*AGLAIA hurries into the palace.*)

Today I am to be married to Alcestis, daughter of King
Pelias of Iolcos. No guest is more to be honored than
Teiresias. Rest first, Teiresias...

TEIRESIAS. There are ten thousand weddings. Let this

queen make haste. Hear me, Minos, King of Crete...
Boy, what is his name?

(**BOY** *whispers*)

Well, what does it matter? Is this queen here?

(*enter from the palace* **ALCESTIS**, *breathless with wonder*)

ADMETUS. She is here.

ALCESTIS. Noble Teiresias...great Teiresias! My father's old friend. I am Alcestis, daughter of King Pelias of Iolcos.

TEIRESIAS. (*waving his stick testily at those pressing around him*)
Back! Keep back! Geese and ducks and quacklings.
Silence and hold your tongues. Zeus, father of gods
and men, has commanded...has commanded... Boy,
what has he commanded?

(**BOY** *whispers*. **TEIRESIAS** *strikes him*.)

Well, you don't have to run on... Has commanded
that Apollo, my master – that Apollo come down from
Olympus; and that he live on earth for one year, solstice
to solstice...live as a man among men. I have given my
message. Boy, lead me to the road. (*He turns to go*.)

ALCESTIS. (*while the* **BOY** *whispers into* **TEIRESIAS** *'s ear*) Apollo
is to live on the earth?

TEIRESIAS. (*to the* **BOY**) Yes, yes. Don't deafen me. And
Apollo, my master, has chosen to live here – (*He strikes
the ground with his stick*.) here as a servant of Admetus,
King of Thessaly.

ADMETUS. Here? Here, noble Teiresias? (*goes quickly to him*)
One moment more, Teiresias. How do I understand
this? You do not mean, divine Teiresias, that Apollo
will be here, with us, as a servant, every day? With us,
each day?

(*As all watch breathlessly, TEIRESIAS, hand to brow,
seems to fall into a deep sleep. Suddenly he awakes and
says:*)

TEIRESIAS. Outside the gate are four herdsmen. They are

to be your servants for a year. Assign them their duties.
One of them is Apollo.

ADMETUS. (*repeating*) One of them is Apollo?

TEIRESIAS. Four herdsmen. One of them is Apollo. Do not try to know which one is the God. I do not know. You will never know. And ask me no more questions, for I have no more answers. Boy, call the herdsmen.

(*The BOY goes out. Silence.*)

ADMETUS. Teiresias, should we not... fall on our knees, on our faces?

TEIRESIAS. You do not listen to what's said to you. Apollo is here, *as a man*. As a man. As a common herdsman or shepherd... Do as I do!

(*The BOY returns and presses close to TEIRESIAS. Enter the four HERDSMEN. They are dusty, dirty, unshaven common oafs. They are deeply abashed by the great folk before them, touch their forelocks obsequiously, shuffle into a line against the wall, and don't know what to do with their eyes. Two have great wineskins; all have big sticks. TEIRESIAS speaks gruffly to them.*)

TEIRESIAS. (*cont.*) Come, don't be slow about it. Make your bow to your new master. Anyone can see you've been drinking. A nice way to begin your service. (*waving his stick*) If I had eyes to see, I'd beat you. Forward; pick up your feet. Boy, are they all four here? Well, has the King lost his voice?

ADMETUS. (*pulling himself together*) You are welcome to Thessaly. You are welcome to the wedding feast, for I am to be married today. Tomorrow I shall assign you your herds and flocks. You have made a long journey. You are welcome to Thessaly... Teiresias, you, too, have made a long journey. Will you not bathe and rest?

TEIRESIAS. I have a longer journey to go. My message has been delivered. Boy, lead me out the gate.

ALCESTIS. (*coming to a few steps before him; in a low voice*)

Divine Teiresias? Have you no message for Alcestis?

TEIRESIAS. Who's this woman?

ALCESTIS. I am Alcestis, daughter of King Pelias of Iolcos. I sent many messages and offerings to Delphi and –

TEIRESIAS. Messages and offerings. There are mountains of them. Boy, lead me to the road.

*(But the **BOY** keeps pulling at his sleeve and shoulder and trying to whisper to him.)*

Oh, yes, I had a message for some girl or woman—for Jocasta, or Alcestis, or Deianeira, or I care not whom, but I have forgotten it. Boy, stop dragging at me! *(He strikes the **BOY** with his stick.)* Worthless! Impudent!

*(The **BOY** falls. **TEIRESIAS** continues to beat him.)*

BOY. *(Screaming.)* Teiresias! Help! Help! King Admetus!

ADMETUS. Surely, great Teiresias, the boy has not –

ALCESTIS. It was a small fault, Teiresias. I beg you spare the boy. He will learn.

TEIRESIAS. *(suddenly stopping and peering at **ALCESTIS**)*
Whatever your name is: Jocasta, Leda, Hermione-

ALCESTIS. Alcestis.

TEIRESIAS. I had a message for some girl, but I have forgotten it. Or else I've delivered it already. That's it: I've delivered it. By thunder and lightning, by the holy tripod – what use is Delphi if men and women cannot learn to listen?

*(**TEIRESIAS** is following the **BOY** out of the gate, when **ADMETUS** takes some steps forward.)*

ADMETUS. You said...you said there was peril, Teiresias?

TEIRESIAS. *(half out of the gate)* Of course there's peril, imbecile. When they *(brusque gesture upward)* draw near it is always peril.

ADMETUS. But my father said that Apollo has always loved Thessaly...

TEIRESIAS. Yes – love, love, love. Let them keep their love

to themselves. Look at me: five – six hundred years old and pretty well loved by the gods and I am not allowed to die. If the gods didn't love men, we'd all be happy; and the other way round is true, too: if we men didn't love the gods, we'd all be happy.

(TEIRESIAS exits, with the BOY. A bewildered pause.

ADMETUS collects himself and says in a more matter-of-fact, authoritative tone to the four HERDSMEN:)

ADMETUS. Again, you are welcome to Thessaly and to Pherai. *(to the WATCHMAN)* See that they are well provided for. *(again to the HERDSMEN)* I am happy that you are to be guests at my wedding today.

(ADMETUS and all on the stage watch in confused awe as the WATCHMAN guides them down the path to the spring. They pass ADMETUS with servile timidity; by the spring they stretch out, pass the wineskin from one to another; one promptly falls asleep. ADMETUS has not looked at ALCESTIS. Partly to her and partly to himself, he says reflectively:)

ADMETUS. *(cont.)* I do not know what to think of these things... I am a mere herdsman myself. Alcestis, there is great need of you in Pherai.

(He stretches his hand out behind him. She, frozen in thought, does not take it.)

I must return to my guests. *(with a last echo of his awe)* I do not know what to think of these things. *(then with a smile)* Alcestis, there is an old custom here in Thessaly that a bridegroom should not see the face of his bride until the evening of his wedding day. This has been said for many hundreds of years. Is there also such a custom at Iolcos?

ALCESTIS. *(low)* Yes, Admetus.

ADMETUS. *(passing her with youthful vigor, his hand shielding his face)* Hereafter – by the God's gift – I may look upon your face until I die. *(At the door of the palace, he is arrested by a thought. Still shielding his face, he comes in*

slow deliberation to the point of the stage, overhanging the HERDSMEN by the spring. After taking a deep breath of resolution, he says with unemphatic directness:) Apollo, friend of my father and my ancestors and my land, I am a simple man, devout. I am not learned in piety. If, in ignorance, I blunder and fall short, may He who has been the friend of my house and my people forgive me. You have come on a day when I am the happiest of all men. Continue your favor to me and to my descendants... *(slight pause)* I am not skilled in speech. You can read all minds. Read what is in mine, or rather...yourself plant in my mind those wishes which only you can fulfill.

(He turns and goes quickly into the palace.)

ALCESTIS. *(who has not ceased to keep her eyes on the HERDSMEN, half in longing and half in doubt and repulsion – though they are now hidden from where she is standing, murmuring.)* Is Apollo there?

AGLAIA. Princess!

ALCESTIS. One of those? And could that old man have been Teiresias of Delphi – that broken, crazy old man?

AGLAIA. *(really shocked; firmly)* Do not doubt these things, Princess.

ALCESTIS. *(after taking a few steps toward them; in sudden resolve)* Leave me alone with them.

(AGLAIA makes a gesture to the WATCHMAN and both go out. During the following speech, though one is asleep and snoring, the others are embarrassed by her presence. The wineskin is being passed around; they scarcely dare to raise their eyes to her.)

Are you here? I have spoken to you a thousand times – to the sky and the stars and the sun. And I have sent messages to Delphi. Are you now, truly, within the hearing of my voice? *(silence, broken by a snore and a grunt)* Some say that you do not exist. Some say that the gods are far away; they are feasting on Olympus, or are

asleep, or drunk. I have offered you my life. You know that I have wished to live only for you: to learn – to be taught by you – the meaning of our life. *(no answer)* Are we human beings to be left without any sign, any word? Are we abandoned? *(She waits another second above the embarrassed silence of the HERDSMEN, then turns toward the palace, and says to herself, bitterly:)* Then we must find our way by ourselves...and life is a meaningless grasping at this and that; it is a passionate nonsense...

(The FIRST HERDSMAN – the dirtiest, most insignificant of the four – rises. He touches his cap in humble embarrassment and says:)

HERDSMAN. Princess, did that old man say that there was a god among us? Did I hear him say that? The God Apollo? Then, lady, I am as surprised as you are. Lady, for thirty days we four have walked all across Greece. We have drunk from the same wineskin; we have put our hands in the same dish; we have slept by the same fire. If there had been a god among us, would I not have known it?

(ALCESTIS, in hope and revulsion, has taken several steps toward him.)

By all I value, lady, I swear we are just ordinary herdsmen. Ignorant herdsmen. But...but one thing I will say, lady: we are not quite ordinary herdsmen. Why, that fellow there – the one that's snoring: there's no illness he cannot cure. Snakebite or a broken back. Yet I know that he is not a god, Princess. And that fellow beside him, that one! *(He goes forward and kicks the HERDSMAN.)* Can't you stop drinking while the princess is looking at you? He never loses his way. In the darkest night he knows his north from his south and his east from his west. Oh, it's wonderful. Yet I know well that he's not the god of the sun. *(adding under his breath:)* Besides, his habits are filthy, are filthy.

ALCESTIS. *(barely breathing it)* And that one?

HERDSMAN. That man? He's our singer.

ALCESTIS. Ah!

HERDSMAN. Believe me, when he plays the lyre and sings – oh, Princess! It is true that at times I have said to myself, “Surely this is a god.” He can fill us to the brim with joy or sadness when we have no reason at all to be joyful or sad. He can make the memory of love more sweet than love itself. But, Princess, he is no god. (*as though she had contradicted him; with sudden argumentative energy*) How can he be a god when he's in misery all the time and drinking himself to death? Killing himself, you might say, before our own eyes. The gods don't hate themselves, Princess.

ALCESTIS. And you?

HERDSMAN. I? I, Apollo? Not only am I not Apollo, but I'm not ready to believe that Apollo is here.

ALCESTIS. Teiresias... Teiresias said...

HERDSMAN. Was that Teiresias – that half-witted, crumbling old man? Can they find no better messenger than that? Can't they say what they have to say in any clearer way than this?

(*Again ALCESTIS turns toward the palace; then turns toward the HERDSMAN and says, as though talking to herself:*)

ALCESTIS. Then we are indeed miserable. Not only because we have no aid, but because we are cheated with the hope that we might have aid...

HERDSMAN. (*taking more steps onto the stage*) But if they did exist, these gods, how would they speak to us? In what language would they talk to us? Compared to them, we are diseased and dying and deaf and blind and as busy as clowns. Why, there are some who even say that they love us. Could you understand that? What kind of love is that, Princess, when there is so great a gulf between the lovers? (*He starts to return to his place in the path.*) That would be an unhappy love, no doubt about that.

ALCESTIS. (*earnestly and sharply*) No, not unhappy!

HERDSMAN. (*with equal spirit*) Yes. For if they showed themselves to us in their glory, it would kill us. (*pause*) I did have an idea this morning: maybe there is another way – a way to bridge that gulf, I mean. Maybe they can find a way to bring those they love up – up nearer to them. If Teiresias is right, Apollo is here in Thessaly. Now, maybe that foolish old man got his message wrong. Maybe he was supposed to say that Apollo is here divided up among many people – us four herdsmen and others! Take Admetus, for example. I've only seen him for a few hours. I must confess, Princess, at first I was very disappointed in Admetus. There's nothing very extraordinary about him. Did you ever see Hercules, Princess?

ALCESTIS. (*nods her head slightly*) Yes.

HERDSMAN. (*suddenly recollecting*) Ah, yes. He sought your hand. There's a man! Hercules, son of Zeus and Alcmena. And you can see it at once. I've seen a dozen better men than Admetus. But...slowly I began to see that King Admetus has something that all those other heroes haven't got... The world changes; it changes slowly. What good would this world be, Princess, unless new kinds of men came into it – and new kinds of women?

(*Enter ADMETUS, wearing on his right shoulder a light-blue cloak like Apollo's. He stands watching from the top step.*)

And wouldn't that be, maybe, the way those unhappy lovers (*he points upward*) would try to throw a bridge across the gulf I was talking about? (*He becomes aware of ADMETUS. Obsequiously bowing his head, and pulling his forelock, murmuring.*) We wish you all happiness...many years. (*He goes back to his place.*)

(*The sun is setting. The sky behind the palace roof is filled with color.*)

ADMETUS. (*with set face*) Aglaia has told me of your wish to leave, Princess Alcestis. You are, of course, free to go.

There are no constraints here. There are no slaves in Thessaly, Princess – not even its queen. I have just given orders that your drivers and your maids be prepared for the journey. *(He takes one step down.)* Before you leave, I wish to say one thing. I do not say this in order to win your pity, nor to dissuade you from what you have planned to do. I say this because you and I are not children; and we should not conceal from one another what is in our hearts. *(slight pause)* It is still a great wonder to me that I was able to yoke the lion and the boar. But I am in no doubt as to why I was able to do it: I loved you. I shall never see you again. I shall never marry. And I shall never be the same. From now on I shall know that there is something wrong and false in this world into which we have been born. I am an ordinary man, but the love that filled me is not an ordinary love. When such love is not met by a love in return, then life is itself a deception. And it is best that men live at random, as best they may. For justice...and honor...and love are just things we invent for a short time, as suits the moment. May you have a good journey, Princess Alcestis.

(ALCESTIS has been standing with raised head but lowered eyes. She now puts out her hand.)

ALCESTIS. Admetus. *(slight pause)* Admetus, ask me again to marry you.

(He takes one quick step toward her; she again puts out her hand quickly to stop him.)

Ask me to love all the things that you love and to be the queen of your Thessaly. Ask me in pain to bear you children. To walk beside you at the great festivals. To comfort you when you are despairing. To make sure that when you return from a journey the water for your bath will be hot, and that your house, Admetus, will be as well ordered as your mind. To live for you and for your children and for your people – to live for you as though every moment I were ready to die for you...

ADMETUS. (*joyously and loudly*) No-no Alcestis! It is I... (*He takes her outstretched hand. They do not embrace.*) Alcestis, will you be the wife of Admetus, King of Thessaly?

ALCESTIS. With my whole self, Admetus...

(*They go into the palace.*)

ACT TWO

(The same scene, twelve years later. Again first dawn. The same WATCHMAN comes around the palace. He does not shake his rattle. He speaks softly, slowly, and dejectedly.)

WATCHMAN. The watch before dawn...the palace of Admetus the Hospitable, King of Thessaly, rich in horses. *(He stands a moment, his eyes on the ground; then to the audience.)* And all is as bad as it possibly could be... as it possibly could be. *(He goes to the gate, which is ajar, and talks to a whispering crowd outside.)* No, my friends. There is no news. The King is still alive; he has lived through another night. The Queen is sitting by his bed. She is holding his hand... No news. No change... Take that dog away; we must have no barking. Yes, the King drank some ox blood mixed with wine. *(He returns to the center of the stage and addresses the audience.)* Our King is at the point of death, there is no doubt about it. You remember those herdsmen, twelve years ago, that Teiresias brought here, saying that one of them was Apollo – and that Apollo would live here as a servant for a year? You remember all that?

Well, at the end of the year did they go away? No; all four of them are still here. Was Apollo in one of them? Nobody knows. Don't try to think about it; you'll lose your senses if you try to understand things like that. But, friends, that first year was a wonderful year. I cannot explain this to you: it was no more or less prosperous than other years. To a visitor, to a passerby, everything would have appeared the same. But to us who were living it, everything was different. The facts of our human life never change; it is our way of seeing them

that changes. Apollo was certainly here. *(pause)* What? How did King Admetus come by his illness? Well, as I say, those four herdsmen stayed on. They were good fellows and good workers – though they talked south-country Greek. But two of them – eh ! – drank their wine without water. And one evening at sunset time those two were sitting drinking – there, right there! – and a quarrel arose between them. There was shouting and chasing about, and King Admetus came out to put a stop to it. Then – oh, my friends – one of the herdsmen whipped out his knife and stabbed King Admetus by mistake, stabbed him from here *(points to his throat)* right down his side to the waist. You could put your hand in it. That was weeks ago. The wound didn't heal. It got angry and boiled and watered and boiled and watered, and now the King must surely die. No one's wanted to punish the herdsman whose body held Apollo – you see? And the crime may have been Apollo's will – try to think that through! And that herdsman's outside the gate now – is always there – flat on the ground, flat on his face, wishing he were dead.

(There is a rising murmur of excited voices at the gate.)

Now what's all that noise about?

(AGLAIA comes hurriedly out of the palace.)

AGLAIA. What's all that noise? Watchman, how can you allow that noise?

WATCHMAN. *(hobbling to the gate)* They've only just begun it.

AGLAIA. *(at the gate)* What's all this cackling about? Don't you know you must be quiet?

WATCHMAN. Have you no sense? Have you no hearts? What? What?

AGLAIA. What? What messenger? Tell him to go around to the front of the palace and to go quietly. What messenger? Where's he from?

(Enter ALCESTIS, from the palace.)

ALCESTIS. There must be no noise. There must be no noise. Aglaia, how can you allow this noise?

AGLAIA. Queen Alcestis, they say that a messenger has come.

ALCESTIS. What messenger?

WATCHMAN. *(has received through the gate a small rectangular leaf of gold, which he gives to ALCESTIS)* They are saying that a messenger came during the night and left this.

(ALCESTIS stands looking at it in her hand. The WATCHMAN leans over and examines it in her hand and continues talking officiously.)

It is of gold, lady. See, those are the signs – that is the writing – of the Southland. There is the sun...and the tripod...and the laurel... Queen Alcestis, it is from Delphi. It is a message from Delphi!

(ALCESTIS suddenly performs the ritual: she places the leaf first to her forehead, then on her heart, then on her lips.)

ALCESTIS. Where is the messenger?

(The WATCHMAN goes to the gate – now slightly open – and holds a whispered colloquy.)

WATCHMAN. *(turning back toward ALCESTIS.)* He went away – hours ago, they say.

ALCESTIS. Who can read this writing? Watchman, go call those four herdsmen!

WATCHMAN. They are here, lady-all four of them.

(Again a busy colloquy at the gate. It opens further to admit the four HERDSMEN. The HERDSMAN who held the long conversation with ALCESTIS in Act I flings himself on the ground, face downward, holding his head in his hands.)

ALCESTIS. Can one of you read the writing of the Southland?

HERDSMAN. *(raising his head)* I can...a little, Queen Alcestis.

ALCESTIS. Then stand. Stand up.

(He rises. She puts the leaf in his hand. He looks at it a moment, then puts it to his forehead, heart, and lips; and says in awe:)

HERDSMAN. It is from the temple of Apollo at Delphi.

(Some TOWNSPEOPLE have pressed through the gate. The HERDSMAN starts reading with great difficulty.)

“Peace...and long life...to Admetus the Hospitable,
King of Thessaly, rich in horses.”

ALCESTIS. Long life?

HERDSMAN. “Peace and long life to Admetus the Hospitable –”

ALCESTIS. Stop. *(to the WATCHMAN)* Close the gate.

(The WATCHMAN pushes the TOWNSPEOPLE off the stage, and after a glance at ALCESTIS, also drives off the three other HERDSMEN. He closes the gate. ALCESTIS returns to the reader, who has been trying to decipher the text.)

HERDSMAN. “King Admetus...not...will not die.”

AGLAIA. Great is Apollo! Great is Apollo!

HERDSMAN. “Will not die...if...if...because...no, if...another...if someone else...if a second person...desires... *(He points to his heart.)* wishes...longs...desires to die...” Lady, I do not know this last word.

ALCESTIS. I know it.

HERDSMAN. *(struggling, finds it)* “In his place...in his stead.”
Great is Apollo!

AGLAIA. What does it say? What does it say?

WATCHMAN. I. I shall die. *(starting left)* My sword, where is my sword?

AGLAIA. *(getting the idea)* No. *(strongly, to the WATCHMAN)* No.
This message is for me. I was there when he was born:
I shall die for him. I shall throw myself in the river.

WATCHMAN. *(returning; to AGLAIA.)* This is not for a woman to do.

HERDSMAN. (*kneeling, his fists pressed against his eyes in concentration*) I have begun to die already.

AGLAIA. Queen Alcestis, tell me... I must do it properly: how does one die for King Admetus?

WATCHMAN. (*self-importantly placing himself between AGLAIA and ALCESTIS*) Give your orders to me, Queen Alcestis. It is very clear that this message was meant for me.

HERDSMAN. (*again throwing himself full length on the ground*) I struck him. I am to blame for all!

ALCESTIS. (*who has waited, motionless, for silence*) How would you die in his stead? (*pause*) Do you think it is enough to fling yourself into the river – or to run a sword through your heart? (*pause*) No – the gods do not ask what is easy of us, but what is difficult.

AGLAIA. (*sobbing*) Queen Alcestis, how does one die for King Admetus?

HERDSMAN. I know. I know. (*He turns and starts to go to the gate.*) Peace and long life to King Admetus!

ALCESTIS. (*to the HERDSMAN*) Wait!

(*They all watch her. She says quietly:*)

Aglaia, go and lay out the dress in which I was married.

AGLAIA. (*stares at her in sudden realization; horrified whisper*) No. No...you must not...

ALCESTIS. Tell the children I am coming to see them. Tell the King the sun is warm here. He must come out and sit in it.

(*sudden clamor from the others*)

AGLAIA. No. No, Queen Alcestis. We are old. Our lives are over.

WATCHMAN. Lady, look at me – I am an old man.

AGLAIA. You cannot do this. He would not wish it. You are queen; you are mother.

ALCESTIS. (*restraining their noise by voice and gesture*) First! First I order you to say nothing of this to anyone. Aglaia, do you hear me?

AGLAIA. Yes, Queen Alcestis.

ALCESTIS. Watchman!

WATCHMAN. Yes, Queen Alcestis.

ALCESTIS. To no one – until tomorrow. No matter what takes place here, you will show no surprise, no grief. Now leave me alone with this man. (*pointing to the HERDSMAN.*)

(AGLAIA goes into the palace; the WATCHMAN out left. The HERDSMAN stands with one fist on his forehead in concentration, and suddenly cries:)

HERDSMAN. King Admetus – rise up! Rise up!

ALCESTIS. You cannot save him.

HERDSMAN. I have begun to die already.

ALCESTIS. Yes, maybe you could do it. But you would do it imperfectly. You wish to die, yes...not for love of Admetus, but to lift the burden of that crime from off your heart. This is work of love, Herdsman; not work of expiation, but of love.

HERDSMAN. (*almost angrily*) I, too, love Admetus.

ALCESTIS. Who does not love Admetus? But your death would be a small death. You long to die: I dread, fear, hate to die. I must die from Admetus – (*she looks upward*) from this sunlight. Only so will he be restored. Can you give him that? (*He is silent. She continues, as though talking to herself.*) I know now what I have to do and how to do it. But I do not know why...why this has been asked of me. You...you can help me to understand why I must die.

HERDSMAN. I?

ALCESTIS. Yes, you – who came from Delphi; in whom Apollo –

HERDSMAN. (*in sincere repudiation*) Lady. Princess, I told you – again and again. If Apollo was in us herdsmen, he was not in me!

ALCESTIS. (*softly and lightly*) You made clear to me that Apollo willed my marriage.

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