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INTRODUCTION

The Politics of Form

This book sets out to prove a very simple proposition: that in Euripidean tragedy, dramatic form is a kind of political content. The project is motivated by two separate but intersecting problems. The first is the problem of Euripidean tragedy. There are eighteen extant tragedies confidently attributed to Euripides and many of them are, for lack of a better word, odd. With their disjointed, action-packed plots, comic touches, and frequent happy endings, they seem to stretch the generic boundaries of tragedy as we usually think of it. These plays were performed in Athens at the annual tragic festival of the City Dionysia, and in this defining sense they clearly counted as "tragedies"; but they lack the unity of plot and coherence of theme, the consistent seriousness of tone, the mythic grandeur that we find in Sophocles and Aeschylus and that we associate with the genre of tragedy.

Here, for example, is the plot of Euripides' *Heracleidai* (*The Children of Heracles*). Following the death of Heracles, the eponymous children have been driven out of Argos by Heracles' lifelong enemy Eurystheus. Along with their aged protector Iolaus, they have wandered throughout Greece looking for refuge. The play opens with them in supplication at the altar of Zeus at Marathon, outside Athens. Eurystheus's herald comes on and tries to seize the children, but Demophon, the king of Athens, agrees to protect them, even at the risk of war with Eurystheus. The first episode ends with grateful praise of Athenian virtue. So far so good. But then Demophon learns of a prophecy that in order to win this war and save his city, he must sacrifice a well-born virgin to Persephone. Where is he to find such a virgin? All seems to be lost. Just then, a daughter of Heracles appears onstage—unnamed and unannounced—and offers herself for sacrifice. She delivers a noble speech, is praised lavishly for her act, and then killed. But after her death neither she nor her sacrifice is mentioned again. Instead, in the third episode a messenger reports that Heracles' oldest son, Hylus, has come with his army to join the Athenians in the children's defense. The decrepit Iolaus is eager to join the battle; he arms himself with weapons he can barely lift and hobbles off to war. In the next scene a herald reports the Athenians' victory and describes a miracle on the battlefield: old Iolaus was magically rejuvenated and, with the help of the deified Heracles, captured Eurystheus. This miracle, like the daughter's sacrifice, is marveled at, then never mentioned again. At this point the play seems essentially over: the children of Heracles are safe and the tyrannical Eurystheus defeated. But the final scene brings a sudden shift of direction when Eurystheus, up to this point the play's arch villain, delivers a sympathetic speech, explaining that his hostility toward Heracles was the gods' will, not his own. King Demophon decrees that the captive should be spared; but Alcmene, Heracles' mother, demands his blood, and the play ends with the chorus leading Eurystheus away to be killed, in violation of their own king's decree and the laws of their city.

This bare summary should provide some sense of the crazy structure of the play, with its fragmented plot of supplication and revenge, its multitude of weak and inconsistent characters, its wild shifts in tone from the high drama of Alcmene's laments to the comic scene of Iolaus's arming. Miracles occur and are promptly forgotten. The mood swings from despair to triumph to anxiety. The children are lost, then saved, then lost, then saved. In the final moments, the sympathies established throughout the play are suddenly reversed, as Eurystheus is rehabilitated and Alcmene calls for a lawless vengeance that the chorus seem prepared to execute, despite the play's earlier praise for democracy and its rule of law. Compare this to the plot of Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, where one act of violence calls forth another in an adamantine chain of crime and revenge spanning generations; or Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, where Oedipus's fate works itself out, piece by piece, with a taut and inexorable necessity. In Euripides' play, by contrast, instead of actions following one another according to a logic of cause and effect, one gets the sense that anything could happen at any time.

What are we to make of a play like this? (And all Euripides' plays are, to a greater or lesser extent, like this.) The difficulty is not so much with the play's content: one can identify a certain thematic coherence around issues of gender, for instance, or read the play as an ambivalent reflection on Athens's imperial obligations.[1] The difficulty is rather at the level of dramatic form. Tragedy presents ideas through the imitation of an action, Aristotle's famous *mimēsis* of a *praxis*, but why is the action in Euripides' tragedies so fragmented and chaotic? Scholars have tried to explain away these plays' oddities by calling some "melodramas," others "romances" or "tragicomedies." But since these were not established genres in the fifth century, this response merely labels their peculiarities without explaining them.[2] Others have seen them as simply inept: Nietzsche isn't the only reader to accuse Euripides of having killed tragedy, and one often detects strains of special pleading or even self-loathing within Euripides scholarship. Obviously, a play like *Heracleidai* operates according to different aesthetic principles from Aristotle's creed of unity, consistency, and probability. Euripides' is rather an aesthetic of "*dissonance*, *disparity*, *rift*, *peripeteia*."[3] But to note this, as many readers have, is again merely to describe Euripidean form without attempting to solve it—"solve," because in these plays dramatic form presents itself as a puzzle, or better yet, as a riddle that may or may not actually have an answer.

The second problem that motivates my project is one that has exercised critics of tragedy from Aristophanes on: that is, the relation between the play and its contemporary world, the political world of democratic Athens. Tragic dramas were, almost without exception, set in the mythic past, not in the fifth-century polis, and almost never allude overtly to their contemporary moment. As an institution, though, tragedy was deeply embedded in its political and social context, for the City Dionysia was a civic as well as a religious and theatrical event. Tragedy was produced by wealthy citizens and judged by a citizen jury; its choruses were composed of citizens, as was the bulk of its audience. The plays were preceded by a series of rituals that showcased Athens's might and magnificence, including the awarding of crowns to civic benefactors, the presentation of tribute by Athens's imperial subjects, libations offered by the victorious generals, and a parade of war orphans who had been raised by the state. Simon Goldhill has argued that the tragedies themselves should be read in and against this context of civic self-presentation. He shows how the tragic texts, with their insistent problematization of collective norms and values, "question, examine and often subvert" the idealized self-image conveyed by the festival, exposing the rifts and tensions within Athens's civic ideology.[4] In Goldhill's reading, the plays were not only socially relevant, but profoundly political, contributing to the discourse of the democratic polis. It is easy to see how this approach might work for a play like *Hera-*

cleidai, in which Athens braves war to protect the suppliants, only to get caught up in the lawless passion of revenge. The play's ambiguous patriotism both complements and complicates the civic ideology of the City Dionysia.

This historicizing approach to the plays has dominated tragedy scholarship for the past twenty-five years, and it has been extremely illuminating. Turning away from the solipsistic aestheticizing of prior formalist criticism, it has aimed to situate the plays within their historical moment, showing how they reflect and reflect on contemporary political life and thought in democratic Athens.[5] But as New Historicism has hardened into an orthodoxy, both in the field of classics and beyond, many have started to worry that in mining the texts for ideological content, it has cast aside important questions of literary form, giving scant attention to the formal structure and poetic language that differentiate a tragedy from, say, a tribute list. New Historicism proposed that social context could render the literary text fully lucid, but instead the text has become translucent. It has been transformed from the Keatsian urn of New Criticism, self-sufficient in its eternal beauty, into an ornate but ultimately vacuous container of an ideology that itself is thereby reified as its determinate content.[6]

In response there has been a call across the humanities for a return to formalism.[7] But the question now is how to stage such a return without losing the gains of historicism: how to study the aesthetic qualities of these literary texts without forgetting that they were the product of a specific historical moment with its own specific political concerns; or alternatively, how to speak about a text's politics without losing sight of its formal aesthetic qualities. The challenge is not just to keep these two sets of issues—the aesthetic and the political—in focus simultaneously, but to theorize their interconnection within the text itself, to identify the ideological work being done in and *by* tragedy's aesthetic form. What is needed, in short, is an immanent critique, in the sense proposed by Theodor Adorno.[8] Through its formal elaboration, Adorno argues, art seeks to establish its autonomy from the social, but by that very gesture it incorporates the social within itself. Thus "the unsolved antagonisms of reality return in artworks as immanent problems of form."[9] In the course of spontaneously pursuing their own internal formal logic, works of art register reality and crystallize ideology: they provide imaginary resolutions to real social contradictions, give formal expression to ideas that went unexpressed or were inexpressible in their society, expose and even expand the limits of possibility of their contemporary context, a context that they can thus properly be said to create. An immanent critique moots the historicist-formalist debate by seeing the work of art as most thoroughly historical where it seems most purely formal, and displaces questions about the conscious intention (the "political message") of the author, whose aesthetic choices, whether he intends so or not, inevitably enact ideological assumptions and entail ideological commitments.[10]

From this perspective, the formal peculiarities of Euripidean drama—the vertiginous twists and turns, the constant irony and shifts of tone, the unexpected appearance of gods—can be seen not just as artistic experimentation for its own sake or, worse, as dramatic incompetence that presaged the death of tragedy, but instead as a specific way of articulating meaning, including political meaning. The structure of these plays is not just a vehicle for political expression, but is itself a kind of political expression, an immanent engagement with the dilemmas and contradictions of life in the democratic polis.

This politics of form is not, of course, unique to Euripides. Jean-Pierre Vernant famously argued that tragedy as a whole encodes the tensions of its historical moment not only in the ambiguities of its language but in its very structure: the genre's defining alternation between individual heroic protagonists speaking in the contemporary dialect of fifth-century Athens and a collective chorus singing archaic lyrics stages a chiastic dialectic between a heroic, mythic past and a democratic, civic present that characterized the "mental world" of fifth-century Athens.[11] Vernant shows us that tragedy does not have to try to be political: regardless of whether a particular play aims to present a political message or seeks to deliver a political lesson, the genre is inherently—immanently—political.[12] This is true of works like Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* or Aeschylus's *Oresteia* no less than of Euripides' *Heracleidai*: structural unity and thematic coherence have a politics of their own. To that extent Euripides offers merely a specific instance of a general phenomenon, but a particularly good one, because his self-conscious formal experimentation and ostentatious formal innovation call attention to form itself. They force us to notice form and demand that we think about it.

Audiences since antiquity have risen to this challenge. Euripides was famous (or infamous) already in his own time for his formal novelty. In the underworld poetry competition of Aristophanes' *Frogs*, he is alternately damned and praised for his daring transformations of the tragic genre: his simplification of tragic diction, his introduction of quotidian subjects and characters, his new melodies and meters. This formal originality was more than simply an aesthetic matter. Accused by his antagonist, the (politically and aesthetically) conservative Aeschylus, of degrading tragedy by filling the stage with all manner of miscreants—cripples, beggars, women in love—the spectral Euripides responds that by giving a voice to everyone his plays teach the audience "to think, see, understand, twist things around, to scheme, to suspect wrongs, to consider things from all angles" (957–58; cf. 971–79). His tragedy, he boasts, is not just technically innovative but democratic (*dēmokratikon*, 952), and it is the latter by virtue of being the former.

As Aristophanes' infernal poetry contest demonstrates, Euripides' contemporaries were attuned to the political implications of aesthetic form in general, and of his aesthetic form in particular. It was widely agreed, for instance, that different musical harmonies and rhythms had specific and identifiable effects on the moral character of the audience: the Lydian mode was soft and effeminizing, the Dorian induced manliness and restraint, and so on. Accordingly, *mousikē* (music, poetry, dance) was the object of intense ethical and educational concern.[13] In the late fifth century, much of this concern centered on the so-called New Music, an avant-garde musical movement for which Euripides was often presented as the poster boy. For its critics the formal innovations of this movement—its greater melodic flexibility, metrical heterogeneity, and syntactical freedom—were not only symptoms of the license and chaos of the radical democracy, but in fact their cause: Plato attributes Athens's degeneracy to the mixing of musical genres, one of the innovations for which Euripides is taken to task in *Frogs*.[14] Poetry and music are politically dangerous not only for what they represent (although that is a constant worry for Plato and mimesis a problem in itself within his ontology), but also for how they represent it. Plato quotes Damon of Oa, a music theorist and prominent figure in the New Music: "One must take care in changing to a new form of music, since this creates risks for the whole; musical modes can never be altered without altering the weightiest laws of the polis" (*Republic* 424c3–6). Plato agrees: he subjects musical modes to minute legal regulation in his *Laws* and bans poetry outright from the ideal city of his *Republic*. The Athenians apparently also agreed—and ostracized Damon from Athens.[15]

Aesthetic form, then, is never purely or abstractly formal for the Greeks: it has real ethical and political effects. It achieves these effects through its *psukhagōgia* or "leading of the *psukhē*" (soul, mind, psyche).

Acting on the *psukhē* as medicine does on the body, poetry injects "terrified shuddering and tearful pity and sorrowful longing," as Gorgias puts it, "and through words the *psukhē* suffers its own suffering at the successes and failures of others' affairs" (*Encomium of Helen* 9).[16] While all language has this magical force, tragedy is, of all genres, "most delightful to the masses and most able to move the soul" (*dēmoterpestaton te kai psukhagōgikōtaton*, Plato *Minos* 321a4–5). The pairing of *dēmoterpestaton* and *psukhagōgikōtaton* is not accidental. For Plato, tragedy arouses the inferior, irrational part of the soul against the superior and reasoning part, creating a state of psychic anarchy of which the political analogue was radical democracy (*Republic* 605a–c). In the *Timaeus* he imagines *psukhagōgia* working upon the appetitive part of the soul, the *epithumētikon*: locked away near the liver, far from the deliberating part of the soul so as not to interrupt its operations, the *epithumētikon* does not understand reason but is "soul-led by images and phantasms" (*hupo de eidōlōn kai phantasmatōn . . . psukhagōgēsoito*, 71a5–7).[17] Aristotle is more reticent, in the *Poetics* at least, about the political implications of tragic *psukhagōgia*, and more sanguine about its ethical value. There, a well-wrought tragic plot stimulates an intellectual response, encouraging the viewer to make ethical judgments about the relation between action and character and between virtue and happiness.[18] But even in Aristotle tragedy's *psukhagōgia* is not purely cognitive: his admission that theatrical spectacle, generally ignored in the *Poetics*, is psychagogic implies that tragedy's effect can work at a more immediate, visceral level that recalls Plato's *epithumētikon*, avidly consuming its phantasmatic images.[19]

These ancient theorizations of tragic *psukhagōgia* suggest that it is by operating on the psyche that dramatic form achieves political force. Aesthetic form provides a syntax for the imaginary articulation of the audience's real conditions of existence; it "leads the soul" to adopt certain subjective relations to that reality.[20] Ideology is not something that aesthetic form contains, then, but something it *does*. This book explores that premise. It seeks the content of the plays' political thought in their dramatic form, in their innovative use of the manifold generic resources of tragedy, and, especially, in their structuring of action (*muthos*), following Aristotle's insight that "*muthos* is the first principle and, as it were, the soul (*psukhē*) of tragedy" because its reversals and recognitions are the greatest vehicle for tragic *psukhagōgia* (*ta megista hois psukhagōgei hē tragōidia*, *Poetics* 1450a33–39). In *muthos*, soul and story move together, and they trace an ideological trajectory.

To the extent that it focuses on these formal elements of tragedy, this study is formalist. As should be clear already, this is not an empty formalism (although empty formalism and its political consequences will emerge as Euripidean themes). For the Greeks, as we have seen, aesthetic form was never ethically neutral, never purely abstract, never "empty." This is particularly true of Euripides, in whose plays form takes on a texture and materiality of its own. If, as James Porter puts it in a recent critique of formalism in the study of ancient aesthetics, "matter is the dirtiness of form, and it is visible whenever form's function becomes the object of perception instead of the mechanism that filters and guides perception," then Euripidean form is "dirty": we cannot help but notice it.[21] Moreover, as Aristophanes and the critics of the New Music show, it is "contagious," infecting the psyches of its citizen audience. These contemporary political epidemiologies of form suggest that Euripides' formal experiments, although self-conscious, are never merely or solipsistically self-referential.[22] When Euripides calls attention to the formal workings of his theater, it is not just to remind his audience that they are watching a play (something of which they were presumably well aware), but to invite them to consider the active force of the play's form: what it makes thinkable or unthinkable, what contradictions it mediates or calcifies, what political and ethical attitudes it commits them to—in short, where its *psukhagōgia* is leading them. In this sense, Euripides' formal reflection—thinking *in* form *about* form and its political entailments—anticipates my own, proving once again Nicole Loraux's thesis that there is nothing about ancient Greece that the Greeks have not already thought before us—and Euripides perhaps more than most.[23]

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In the rest of this chapter, I would like to elaborate what I mean by the politics of form by way of a brief illustration. *Alcestis* is Euripides' earliest surviving play, produced in 438 BCE. The hero, Admetus, has obtained a reprieve from death: he can live on if he can convince someone else to die in his place. His mother and father refuse, but his wife, Alcestis, agrees, and the first half of the play stages her noble self-sacrifice and pathetic death, complete with mourning servants and weeping children. Admetus grieves extravagantly after she is gone: he swears never to remarry and renounces all pleasure. In the midst of his mourning an old friend happens to stop by, Heracles, en route to one of his labors. Admetus conceals his grief to offer his guest hospitality, but

Heracles discovers the news from one of the servants. Touched by his host's generosity and moved by his sorrow, Heracles wrestles Death and brings Alcestis back to life, handing her over to her husband in the final scene.

This play is odd, even for a Euripidean tragedy. The City Dionysia featured three days of theatrical productions. On each day, a different playwright presented three tragedies followed by a satyr play, a short burlesque piece featuring a chorus dressed as the eponymous satyrs. The plays were written in tragic language and featured the same sort of mythical heroes that we find in tragedy, but the tone is generally light and the humor tends (as one might expect of satyrs) toward the obscene. *Alcestis* was staged as the fourth play of its day, in the slot usually reserved for a satyr play. We know this from the ancient hypothesis (a brief synopsis from the third century BCE), which also comments that the play is "rather like a satyr play (*saturikōteron*) because, unlike a tragedy, its reversal is toward joy and happiness."[24]

Alcestis does, indeed, stage a reversal from bad fortune to good and ends with what seems, at least at first blush, like a happy ending, the long-awaited reunion of husband and wife. And the play does have some light—even funny—moments, as when a drunken Heracles, ignorant of Alcestis's recent death, carouses around the house, much to the disapproval of the slaves. But despite its light tone, this play is still far from the vulgar slapstick of a typical satyr play, and it lacks the satyr play's defining feature, satyrs. *Alcestis* has a thoroughly proper chorus of elderly citizens. Moreover, the very features that made *Alcestis* seem *saturikōteron* also characterize many other Euripidean plays whose tragic pedigree is unquestioned. The hypothesist himself notes that *Orestes* also features a reversal from misfortune to good fortune and a happy ending; so, too, do *Helen* and *Ion* and *Iphigeneia among the Taurians*. Aristotle allows that tragic reversals can move in either direction—from good fortune to bad or from bad to good—and implies that popular tastes in his day favored the latter, although he himself judges plays that end in misfortune the most tragic (*tragikōtatai*) in performance, and notes, ironically, that Euripides is on this score the most tragic of poets (*tragikōtatos ge tōn poiētōn*, *Poetics* 1453a23–30; cf. 13–15). Likewise, the sort of comic touches that we find in *Alcestis* occur in other plays as well, like the decrepit Iolaus excitedly arming himself for battle in *Heracleidai*. It is possible that in 438 this sort of thing seemed too outré to be staged under the heading of "tragedy" but that over the next three decades Euripides' experimentation expanded the definition of the genre. At any rate, while *Alcestis* is institutionally anomalous, its formal peculiarities are in fact typical of Euripidean tragedy as a whole.

The play opens with a prologue scene between the god Apollo and Thanatos, Death, who has come to fetch Alcestis to the underworld. The conversation between the gods lays out the premise of the play—that Alcestis has agreed to die in place of Admetus and her time has come—and also predicts its happy conclusion: Apollo announces that Heracles will come and steal the woman back, laying out the plot (65–71). This sort of plot prolepsis is quite common in Euripidean prologues, and, as we shall see in future chapters, it is not always to be trusted. Here, though, Apollo's role as god of prophecy might give us confidence (despite Death's objections) in his promise of a happy ending. That promise helps us to watch the suffering of Alcestis's death and Admetus's grief: we can enjoy their anguish knowing—or at least hoping—that all will be well that ends well. In this sense the prologue signposts the drama's psychagogic trajectory, setting the direction not only of the action but also of our affective response to it.

The play unfolds much as Apollo predicts. Alcestis's death is staged in poignant detail. A servant describes her preparations for death within the house and reports her final tearful apostrophe to the marriage bed: "Oh bed where I gave up my maidenhood to this man for whose sake I die; farewell. . . . Some other woman will possess you now, luckier than I perhaps but not more virtuous" (177–82). We hear of her young children hanging from their mother's dress sobbing, and how she comforted them, taking them in her arms and kissing first one then the other, on the very verge of death (189–91). Everyone is in tears: Alcestis, Admetus, the children, the servants (192–203). The vivid pathos of this messenger speech is amplified when Alcestis herself is carried onstage "to see the light of the sun, one last time and then never again" (206–7). As she sees winged Death coming for her and feels her eyes dimming, she says her final goodbye to her husband, making him promise not to remarry and take a stepmother for her children. She dies before our eyes, the only onstage natural death in Greek tragedy. In fact, she dies not once but twice, first in intensely imagistic lyrics, then in a long *rhēsis* (speech), prolonging the crucial moment and exploiting to the full the formal possibilities of tragic expression. Her little children wail over their dead mother and beg her to come back to them (393–415), another dramatic amping-up of pathos, as children, too, are very rare on the tragic stage. Admetus's grief is hyperbolic: he will never remarry, he will mourn for the rest of his days (328–42). There will be no more parties and drinking, no more flutes or lyres: all pleasure will die with Alcestis (343–47). After she is gone, he mourns in high lyric style: he envies the dead, he threatens to hurl himself into the grave alongside his dead wife (865–67, 895–902). He imagines his barren future—the lonely house, empty bed, and crying children—and wishes he were dead (935–61).

The emotional demand of such scenes is not subtle. We are told early on that a good man will grieve with the sufferings of the good (109–11), and the play's pathetic onslaught leaves us little room to resist. How can we not be sad, seeing Admetus's grief? Likewise, how could we not share his joy at the end, when he finally takes his revived wife by the hand? That end comes only after we have witnessed Admetus's remorse, his too-late (and thus quintessentially tragic) realization that he should not have asked his wife to die for him and that the life he thereby gained is not worth living (935–61). It comes only after Heracles has teased both him and the audience, refusing to tell Admetus that the veiled woman he offers him—whose identity we already know—is actually his wife. The ironic gap between his ignorance and our knowledge further heightens the dramatic tension, as Admetus begs Heracles to take the strange woman away, "for looking at her I seem to see my wife and it roils my heart and the tears break from my eyes" (1066–68). Finally, reluctantly, he lifts the veil and recognizes Alcestis. "Oh gods," he cries, "What am I to say? This is a miracle beyond all hope. Is it truly my wife I see? Or is some divine joy mocking me and driving me mad?" (1123–25). She is yours, Heracles says; take her. "You have everything you wanted" (1132). So the play ends with Admetus ordering choruses and sacrifices to be set up throughout the city to celebrate his good fortune. The dead house returns to life, as Admetus announces his happy reversal, his "change of tune" from bad fortune to good (1157–58).

With this summary I've tried to convey the basic emotional trajectory of the play and to suggest that the psychagogic force it exerts over its audience is hard to resist. Our sympathetic involvement is solicited, first by the protagonists' suffering and then by their joy. The vivid description of the scene inside the house, with its touching details and reported speech; the prolonged horror of Alcestis's onstage death; the crying children and heightened language of grief; the choral odes lauding the unprecedented heroism of Alcestis's sacrifice and the unprecedented pain of her loss—Euripides deploys all the resources of the genre to orchestrate an extravaganza of pathos. Likewise, the suspenseful buildup to the couple's reunion intensifies the *peripeteia* and the ultimate fulfillment of the happy ending that we were promised by Apollo at the very start.

Some who resist a historicizing approach to drama have argued that tragedy's aim was simply to give pleasure by arousing the audience's emotions. *Alcestis* would seem a prime example of this "emotive hedonism."[25] Placing formal technique in the service of pathos, it makes us feel Admetus's sorrow and his joy. But as we do so, do we commit ourselves to more than mere emotional catharsis? Is there a politics to the play's pathos? On the surface, *Alcestis* is pointedly apolitical. Set in the mythic kingdom of Pherae, the drama seems distant from the political concerns of democratic Athens. The form itself—the folktale encounter of Apollo and Thanatos and Heracles' wrestling match with Death, the romantic plotline of loss and recovery, the happy ending—would seem to discourage any political interpretation. Its "prosatyric" position may likewise have prompted an audience to experience the drama as simple fun, an escapist fantasy or emotional joyride.[26] And yet, I would like to suggest that there is a politics implicit in the very structure of this ostensibly apolitical plot, one that we take on almost despite ourselves when we succumb to the play's compelling *psukhagōgia*.[27]

One of the key themes of the play, reiterated time and again by the characters and the chorus, is the universality of death: everyone must die, there is no escaping death, death is the one ineluctable necessity (112–31, 418–19, 782–86, 962–94). This is virtually the play's motto and it contributes to the sense of mythic distance: the play purports to be about general human verities, life and death, love and loss. But this universal law is explicitly politicized in the opening scene. Apollo tries to persuade Thanatos to defer Alcestis's death, reminding him that if she dies an old woman her burial will be wealthier (*plousiōs taphēsetai*, 56) and therefore a greater honor for Thanatos. The latter replies, "You are establishing a law for those with means"—literally, "for the haves" (*pros tōn ekhontōn*, 57)—since "those who could would buy the right to die at a ripe old age" (*ōnoint' an hois paresti gēraioi thanein*, 59).

Apollo dismisses this claim as so much sophistry (58), but in fact it resonates with the play's broader thematics. All mortals must die: this iron necessity applies equally to rich and to poor. The chorus try to console Admetus at several points by reminding him that he is not the only person to have lost a loved one (416–18, 892–94). They tell of a kinsman of theirs who lost an only son and yet, old and childless though he was, he bore this loss stoically (903–10). Typically, tragic choruses generalize in the direction of mythology: Niobe lost seven sons and seven daughters in a single day; imagine her grief and bear up under your own. But this comparison to the chorus's anonymous cousin, instead of mythologizing Admetus's grief, democratizes it. Death is the great leveler, no less painful for the average citizen than for the king in his palace. Thus, when Thanatos resists Apollo's suggestion of "a law (*nomos*) for the haves," he establishes mortality as a sort of *isonomia*, the equality of and before the law that was one of the fundamental premises of Athens's democracy.

So, on the one hand, we have the democratic equality of death. On the other hand, though, royalty does seem to have its benefits, for Admetus has escaped death's necessity and broken its universal law not once but twice, first evading death himself and then regaining his dead wife. The king seems to be above the law, an exception to a mandate that we are told has no exception. This is undemocratic enough in itself, but the play is quite clear that what allows him to transgress this unbreachable law is his aristocratic status and connections. Admetus had been able to evade death in the first place because of his friendship with Apollo, who tricked the Fates into agreeing to the exchange of bodies. His life is saved a second time by another friend, Heracles. This theme of friendship is prominent in the play, and is generically marked by allusions to sympotic literature. The role of Heracles is often pointed to as one of the "satyric" features of this play, as Heracles was a popular figure in satyr plays. But here Heracles, for all his drunken carousing, is less satyric than sympotic:[28] he sports the paraphernalia of the symposium (756–60), and his drunken speech (773–802) is full of the diction and tropes of sympotic poetry, where the brevity of life is compensated by the pleasures of convivial companionship.

In sympotic literature, originally the product of the Archaic period and its powerful oligarchies, that companionship is aristocratic, and in *Alcestis* it is no less so. Both Apollo and Heracles are bound to Admetus by a relationship of *xenia*, which refers not to personal bonds of affection but to an institutionalized relationship of guest and host. In the Archaic period, aristocratic houses across Greece maintained *xenia*-bonds—hosting one another, exchanging gifts, intermarrying—and the institution has been seen as instrumental in the consolidation of a Panhellenic elite during this period. In Athens, the democracy attempted to limit such extra-polis alliances but never fully did away with them or the elite class that formed them, and the theme of *xenia*, like the genre of sympotica, continued to carry oligarchic associations.[29]

For Admetus, *xenia* has been a saving grace time and again. Apollo saved Admetus from death the first time in thanks for his hospitality (*xenōi*, 8). Heracles likewise undertakes to return Alcestis to life in gratitude for Admetus's *xenia* at such a difficult time (68, 854–60). Who in all of Greece is a more devoted host, more *philoxenos?* (858) Heracles asks. We see that *philoxenia* firsthand in Admetus's dilemma over whether to entertain Heracles despite his grief. When Heracles first arrived and saw the house in mourning, he offered to leave, "For a *xenos* is a burden to those in mourning" (540); but Admetus insisted he stay and even lied, leading Heracles to believe that the dead person was not someone close to him. The chorus are outraged that Admetus would entertain a guest at such a time (*xenodokein*, 552; cf. 809), but Admetus defends himself on the grounds of *xenia*. Would you praise me if I drove away a *xenos*? Sending away Heracles would not lighten my grief but would only add to it by earning me a reputation for being a bad host (*axenōteros*, 556; *ekhthroxenous*, 558). No, he says, my house does not know how to dishonor a *xenos* (566–67).

The chorus quickly come around and praise Admetus extravagantly in the ode that follows (569–605). "Oh ever-hospitable house of a liberal man!" (*ō poluxeinos kai eleutherou andros aei pot' oikos*, 569). They go on to explain how Admetus had offered hospitality to Apollo when he was living among mortals. This mythic backstory had been recounted by Apollo himself in the opening lines of the play: Zeus was punishing Apollo for taking revenge for Zeus's prior killing of his son Asclepius, who had created drugs that would allow mortals to escape death. The punishment of Asclepius is alluded to throughout the play as evidence of the ineluctability of death (121–31, 966–71). But where Asclepius failed to transgress that mortal law, his father Apollo seems to have succeeded, and he grants Admetus what Asclepius was forbidden to give all mankind, eternal life. His *philoxenia* has brought Admetus this special dispensation. It has also brought him wealth: as a result of his hospitality to Apollo, the chorus note, Admetus rules a house "supremely wealthy in flocks" (588–89) and a vast expanse of land (590–96). Finally, at the end of the ode, the *philoxenia* that has made him wealthy and powerful is praised as the product and proof of his own innate nobility: *to eugenes* (600), his good birth and good breeding, comes out in his hospitality toward Heracles, just as it did in his hospitality toward Apollo. "All wisdom is inherent in the noble," the chorus conclude (*en tois agathoisi de pant' enestin sophias*, 602–3).[30] *Xenia* is thus strongly marked as aristocratic: it is both result and cause of Admetus's elite status, both an inborn virtue and an ethical principle that governs his actions. It is this elite virtue and the elite friendships it seals that allow Admetus to defer his death and win back his wife.

To a democratic Athenian audience, Admetus's lofty social status and important social connections would have been crystal clear. But what, then, is the message of this play? Remember Death's worry that if he lets Alcestis go, that would mean establishing a law in favor of the rich, who would buy a deferral of their own demise. That is, in fact, precisely what Admetus has done, although he's paid for it in favors to influential friends, not in hard cash. Even as the play insists upon the universality of death, it insinuates that if you have the right connections and move in the right circles, you can circumvent that law—not once but repeatedly. Admetus closes the play marveling at his good luck (*eutukhōn*, 1158), and it is true that he seems to have done little to merit his happy reversal of fortune. He is reproached by his father Pheres as a coward who let his wife die for him (675–733), and by Heracles for lying to a friend and letting him revel while the house is in mourning (1008–18). He is a bad husband, a bad son, even a bad friend. All he seems to have going for him is his aristocratic connections. Lucky, indeed.[31]

The play thus induces a cognitive dissonance for its democratic audience. On the one hand, as spectators we are rooting for Alcestis's return and the happy ending: we wept to see Alcestis die, we will rejoice to see her return. The prologue's divine plot prolepsis, the narrative of loss and recovery, the play's dextrous deployment of pathos and suspense, even its prosatyric position with its anticipated *peripeteia* from bad fortune to good—all these formal elements conspire to make that emotional trajectory compelling and encourage us to join in Admetus's celebration at the end. But what exactly are we celebrating? The fact that the universality of death holds for the rest of us, but not for the elite? The fact that a good aristocrat has been rewarded for, essentially, being a good aristocrat? As democratic citizens committed to the egalitarian ideology of *isonomia*, the audience should be uncomfortable with the politics of this "fairy tale" ending.

Euripides in fact goes out of his way to emphasize this dissonance. Right before the final scene, with its joyous reunion, the chorus sing an ode to Necessity, Anankē: nothing is more powerful; no one can escape it, not even the gods. This ineluctable Anankē is none other than death itself, a force mightier than any song of Orpheus or drug of Asclepius (969–71). You cannot bring back the dead by crying, the chorus sing

(985–86). But in fact Admetus *will* bring back the dead by crying: we know that, even as the chorus are lamenting the inevitability of death, Heracles is wrestling Thanatos, and no sooner do they finish than he appears, as he had promised he would, with the silent Alcestis. This ode intensifies the dynamic of the play as a whole: we are told that there are no exceptions to the law of death, but we see with our own eyes that there is, in fact, an exception—for one who is, not coincidentally, extremely well-to-do. Moreover, this exception seems to be allowed, even decreed, by the very gods who bow to the will of Necessity, for Apollo's prediction in the prologue grants Alcestis's return divine sanction. The gods, themselves often imagined as the supreme aristocrats, enforce the iron law of mortality but seem willing to bend the rules when it comes to their own human *xenoi*.[32]

The play thus forces us into an emotional position that has uncomfortable political consequences for a democratic audience. Euripides doesn't spell out those consequences, but the discomfort they produce lingers to cloud the final reunion which, for all its superficial rosiness, contains a sub-current of coercion, deception, and betrayal. Heracles doesn't simply hand over the resurrected Alcestis, but plays a trick on his friend to pay him back for the concealment of his wife's death. Heracles pretends that the veiled Alcestis is just a girl he picked up as a prize in an athletic competition and wants Admetus to look after while he is off on his labors. Admetus is reluctant to take the veiled woman: he had promised his wife on her deathbed that he would not replace her, and this woman reminds him so uncannily of Alcestis (1061–67). He fears the justified reproaches of the servants and his dead wife herself if he betrays his oath and takes this stranger to his bed (1055–60). But despite his pleas, his good friend Heracles forces him to commit this betrayal. The scene is played for its irony—we know all along that the veiled woman is really Alcestis—but it still leaves a bitter taste in the mouth that mars the happiness of the happy ending.[33]

What are we supposed to feel, then, as we leave the Theater of Dionysus after *Alcestis* ends? And recall that we do leave after it ends, since *Alcestis* was the fourth and final play of the day. In fact, perhaps we can now understand this placement better in light of the play's emotional dynamics: the confused response the play induces, its tension between emotional satisfaction and political discomfort, is alleviated by its prosatyric position, which tells us: don't take it all too seriously, relax and enjoy it, it's just a satyr play after all. And maybe that's good advice: maybe after suffering along with their grief, we should just enjoy the reunion of husband and wife, and not worry about the larger metaphysical or political implications of that happy ending achieved in breach of an ostensibly universal law. *Alcestis*'s generic indeterminacy thus smooths over the troubling dissonance between the play's action and its thematics, between its *muthos,* in Aristotle's terms, and its *dianoia* (thought). And so the tragedy closes with a bemused resignation at the unpredictability of the universe: "Many are the shapes of the divinities; many things the gods accomplish against all hope. The expected is not accomplished; for the unexpected the god finds a way. That's how this affair has turned out."

And yet that smoothing-over has a politics of its own, of course, for if *Alcestis*'s prosatyric position encourages us to take it as a simple fantasy of wish fulfillment, it also discourages us from asking precisely whose wishes are being fulfilled. Mark Griffith proposes that the ultimate message of the satyr play is that someone else will solve our problems; all we need to do is acquiesce and "the reward for our acquiescence will follow, in the shape of a miraculously happy ending."[34] *Alcestis* asks us to acquiesce in its romance of elite prerogative. A good man (*khrēstos*) grieves at the suffering of the noble (*agathoi*), says the chorus of Pheraean citizens, and shares like a loyal friend in his sorrow (109–11, 210–12, 369–70). We are asked to be loyal friends to this lucky king, to feel (as the chorus do) for his misfortune and to cheer at its reversal. As a reward for our acquiescence, we also get to share in his happy miracle: the choruses and sacrifices that Admetus proclaims "for the citizens and the whole region" (1154–56) at the play's close anticipate our own post-play celebrations, even as the final lines, with their universalizing wonder at the gods' inscrutable ways, generalize his unexpected reversal to all of us.[35] Thus the play's prosatyric good cheer contributes to the false consciousness the form itself generates. Meanwhile, if we leave the theater feeling grateful to that aristocratic hero for whom wrestling Death is all in a day's work—who solves not only Admetus's problems but (by loosening the dramatic bind) our own—we might also come to feel that he and his friends deserve whatever good luck happens to come their way.

What I hope to have shown in this necessarily sketchy reading is how a play's formal structure can bear political meanings, even in as pointedly apolitical a play as *Alcestis*. The way it sets up its plot, its use of language and song, its modulation of emotions, even its prosatyric position: these formal choices are informed by, even as they give form to, the political possibilities of the playwright's contemporary world.

Even a play that, on its surface, has nothing to say about contemporary politics contains and expresses these possibilities silently within its dramatic structure. Its specific message is hard to pin down, and in the end it's no doubt largely a matter of personal inclination whether one comes away from this play with a warm glow of love regained and prosatyric jubilation at the reversal from bad fortune to good, or with a vague sense of unease—or a more acute sense of class *ressentiment*—at the licensed transgression by which that reversal is achieved. The political force of the play—and, I propose, of Euripidean tragedy in general—is thus formal in two senses. It doesn't tell us what to believe but instead offers a framework, a form, for belief; and that framework is built into the very form of the play. Whatever messages the play may convey about elite exceptionalism, it conveys them not at the level of its explicit content, but in its most fundamental dramatic structure.

Aesthetic form and political meaning are not mutually exclusive, then, as the current critical impasse between formalism and historicism would suggest. Instead, they are indivisible: one cannot strip away the aesthetic form to get to a kernel of political content because the aesthetic form *is* the political content. It is this form of politics—this politics of form—that I propose to explore in the pages that follow, this mutual implication of poetic structure and political meaning that makes Euripides' tragedies, in Adorno's famous phrase, a "sundial telling the time of history."[36]

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