The Story of Alcestis in William Morris and Ted Hughes

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This discussion is based on my re-reading of Morris’s poem ‘The Love of Alcestis’, one of the two poems for the month of June in The Earthly Paradise, when I became aware that Ted Hughes, as part of the encounter with Greek literature that was such a stimulus to his last years of writing, had produced a work called Alcestis, a new version of the play by Euripides. I was curious as to how similar, or dissimilar, the treatment of the subject by these two very different poets might turn out to be.

Morris was familiar with one version of the story of the self-sacrifice of Alcestis from the 1860s. ‘The Legend of Good Women’ was a poem by Chaucer on which the Firm based some of its earliest products. In 1862 Burne-Jones designed a series of ‘Good Wimmen’ tiles for the house ‘Sandroyd’, at Cobham in Surrey, built by Webb for R. Spencer-Stanhope. According to Martin Harrison in his contribution on ‘Church Decoration and Stained Glass’ to the catalogue of the 1996 Morris exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, Burne-Jones then modified the designs in 1863, for embroidery by the girls at Winnington Hall School, Cheshire, as part of a scheme to encourage Ruskin to stay in England – he was threatening to build himself a house in the Swiss Alps. Georgiana Burne-Jones tells us that that Burne-Jones had some difficulty in persuading the ‘damozels’, who could not see ‘how Cleopatra and Medea can be good women’. These embroidery designs in their turn became in 1864 the basis for a set of seven cartoons for stained glass for Birket Foster’s house, ‘The Hill’, at Witley in Surrey. Duplicates of three of these were exhibited by the
Firm in 1862, and three, including ‘The God of Love and Alcestis’, were bought at the time by the South Kensington Museum — although only the ‘Chaucer Asleep’ from the series was illustrated in the catalogue. Harrison informs us that the series proved popular and was repeated in different versions, the most complete surviving set being that installed in the Combination Room at Peterhouse, in Cambridge, in 1869. Burne-Jones was to return to the poem much later for the Kelmscott Chaucer, where his illustration is of Hypsipyle and Medea in the foreground, with the ‘Argos’ in the background, but no Alcestis.

Morris will have worked on the glass, though he might well have known the poem earlier. Chaucer gives Alcestis prominence in his ‘The Legend of Good Women’, when the dreamer-narrator sees ‘walking in the mede / The god of Love, and in his hand a quene, / And she was clad in real habit grene’. Her crown would have pleased Morris, as it is compared to ‘a dayesye / Ycorouned ... with white leves lyre’. Earlier in the poem, the dreamer had found himself in a meadow whose beauty had led him to say ‘Farewel my bok, and my devocioun!’ as he contemplated his favourite spring flowers, ‘Swiche as men callen daysyes in our toun’. The lady Alcestis is saluted with a beautiful ‘Balade’ asserting her superiority to all other claimants to ideal beauty:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Hyd, Absolon, thy gilte tresses clere;} \\
\text{Ester, ley thou thy meknesse al adown;} \\
\text{Hyd, Jonathas, al thy frendly manere;} \\
\text{Penelopee and Marcia Catoun,} \\
\text{Make of youre wifhod no comparysoun;} \\
\text{Hyde ye youre beautes, Ysoude and Eleyne:} \\
\text{My lady cometh , that al this may disteyne.}
\end{align*}
\]

Two further stanzas follow, to the same effect: there is no competition for Alcestis. In the bulk of the poem Chaucer retells the stories of his heroines, beginning with Cleopatra, who have all died for love. Unfortunately, the poem remained unfinished, and Alcestis’s story was not told by Chaucer. Robinson’s note tells us that, ‘As an ancient type of wifely devotion she [Alcestis] was a natural choice for the chief heroine’, but that Chaucer’s source is not known.

However, when Morris was looking for stories to put into The Earthly Paradise a few years later, it was not to Chaucer that Morris turned, but rather to Apollodorus, whose compilation probably of the
second century AD, known as the Bibliotheca or Library, provided summaries of many of the classical stories. Florence Boos notes that Morris used it also for his 'Atalanta's Race'.

As readers of The Earthly Paradise will know, Morris does not in that poem rely for effect on unexpectedness of plot. Each poem begins with an Argument which explains the forthcoming action; this one reads:

Admetus, King of Pharae in Thessaly, received unwittingly Apollo as his servant, by the help of whom he won to wife Alcestis, daughter of Pelias; afterwards too, as in other things, so principally in this, Apollo gave him help, that, when he came to die, he obtained of the Fates for him, that if another would die willingly in his stead, then he should live still; and when to every one this seemed impossible, Alcestis gave her life for her husband's.

The poem, just over 12 double-columned pages in the Longmans 1903 edition – J. M. S. Tompkins remarks that it 'moves at its ease over 45 pages' – follows this narrative through, giving much of its length to the early part of the story, with its emphasis on Apollo and Admetus in a pleasantly pastoral setting. We begin in 'ancient Thessaly', with Admetus, a young ruler endowed with all the qualities that were valued

In those old simple days, before men went
To gather unseen harm and discontent,
Along with all the alien merchandise
That rich folk need, too restless to be wise.

The relaxed form of the couplet as used by Morris emphasises the pastoral mood. One evening a young man comes to Pharae, stating that he has been banished and offering to serve Admetus with his skills as archer, shepherd and musician; Admetus is generously hospitable and gives him work as a herdsman. Later, Admetus goes south to a festival at Iolchos; he returns, loaded with prizes but evidently troubled in spirit. Wandering in the fields in the early morning, he encounters the herdsman, who is in fact the god Apollo, though he is never so named; Apollo had been sent to earth by Zeus to serve Admetus, as punish-
ment for killing the Cyclops in revenge for their having provided the thunder-bolt that had killed Apollo's son Aesculapius. The herdsman is singing one of Morris's most beautiful songs, the first section addressed to humanity, the second to Zeus:

O dwellers on the lovely earth,
Why will ye break your rest and mirth
To weary us with fruitless prayer:
Why will ye toil and take such care
For children's children yet unborn,
And garner store of strife and scorn
To gain a scarce-remembered name,
Cumbered with lies and soiled with shame?
And if the gods care not for you
What is this folly ye must do
To win some mortal's feeble heart?
O fools! when each man plays his part,
And heeds his fellow little more
Than these blue waves that kiss the shore
Take heed of how the daisies grow.
O fools! and if ye could but know
How fair a world to you is given.

O brooder on the hills of heaven
When for my sins thou driv'st me forth,
Hadst thou forgot what this was worth,
Thine own hand had made? The tears of men
The death of threescore years and ten,
The trembling of the timorous race —
Had these things so bedimmed the place
Thine own hand made, thou couldst not know
To what a heaven the earth might grow
If fear beneath the earth were laid,
If hope failed not, nor love decayed.

Apollo notices Admetus's sadness and offers his help. Admetus explains that while in Iolchos he had seen the daughter of King Pelias in the temple, and fallen in love with her. Her father was not opposed to his suit, but revealed that his daughter would perish on her wedding
day unless she was brought to the ceremony in a chariot drawn by lions and boars instead of the more usual oxen. Admetus, in the excitement of love, had engaged to do this, but now feels – not unreasonably – that the task is beyond him, and is thinking, less than heroically, of going into exile. Apollo tells him that he can help; he returns ten days later with the lion-and-boar-led chariot. He gives Admetus a rod inscribed with the names of all the gods to control them and tells Admetus to go to Iolchos and bring back his bride and dowry, and meet him by the temple of Diana, where he must make appropriate sacrifices. As a goddess, Diana is associated with both chastity and childbirth; she was also Apollo’s twin.

Admetus does as he has been told, as he believes; he reaches Iolchos triumphantly, and is given Alcestis as his bride. The lovers are so taken with each other that ‘they forgot that they should ever die’, a phrase that becomes resonant in retrospect. On the way back, they meet Apollo, return the chariot, lions and boars to him, and make their way to Pherae. Here another problem dramatically occurs, as when in the night Admetus goes to claim Alcestis as his bride, he finds her enfolded by and captive to a monstrous serpent. Admetus is driven away, and on the morrow consults Apollo, who tells him that he has not made the appropriate sacrifices to Diana, and offers again to help. After three days, Apollo returns and tells Admetus that all is well – ‘And thou at last mayst come unto thy bliss’. The marriage is consummated, and a memorial to the strange events set up in Diana’s temple.

Autumn arrives and Apollo, who has served the term of his exile, tells Admetus that he is leaving. Now he reveals that he is known on earth as Phoebus – the name Apollo is too dangerous for mortals – and advises Admetus to accept life as it comes. But he offers to come and help him should he ever be in need: he can be summoned by the burning with incense of some shafts that he hands over to Admetus. Apollo then disappears.

Admetus rules at Pherae and lives happily with Alcestis for many years; the emphasis is on the peacefulness of his reign:

For him sufficed the changes of the year,
The god-sent terror was enough of fear
For him; enough the battle with the earth,
The autumn triumph over drought and dearth.
Admetus seems to have inherited some of the qualities of the departed god:

In all things grew his wisdom and his wealth,
And folk beholding the fair state and health
Wherein his land was, said, that now at last
A fragment of the Golden Age was cast
Over the place, for there was no debate
And men forgot the very name of hate.

But death, necessarily, remains unconquered, though Admetus is sustained by a ‘vague hope’ that gives authority to his leadership. His people feel something unusual in him: ‘men felt / That in their midst a son of man there dwelt / Like and unlike them, and their friend through all’.

Eventually Admetus falls ill and is likely to die. He then asks Alcestis to take out the arrows given him by Apollo to burn them, and speaks movingly to her of their mutual love. But it must now end, for even if Apollo somehow rescues him from death, they will no longer be creatures of the same kind. He tries to comfort her by saying that at least they have had some years of happiness together, while some people go through their whole lives in solitude without such happiness. Alcestis carries out the necessary ritual, and Phoebus appears amid the incense. He tells Admetus that he has a chance of surviving death, but only if someone can be found who is prepared freely to give a life in exchange. He goes on to warn him that

‘whoso dieth for thee must believe
That thou with shame that last gift wilt receive
And strive henceforward with forgetfulness
The honied draught of thy new life to bless’.

Admetus is too realistic about human beings to expect that the offer will be taken up, and closes his eyes to await ‘the decrees of fate’. Alcestis, however, has heard the god’s words and responds with ‘wild thoughts’ and a ‘troubled heart and sore’; she feels that she must take on the burden of death to save her husband:
'O me, the bitterness of God and fate!
A little time ago we two were one;
I had not lost him though his life was done,
For still was he in me – but now alone

Through the thick darkness must my soul make moan,
For I must die: how can I live to bear
An empty heart about, the nurse of fear?'

She is appalled by her situation, but accepts that she must die in order to save Admetus, whom she addresses thus in her despair:

'But thou – I come to thee.
Thou sleepest: O wake not, nor speak to me!
In silence let my last hour pass away,
And men forget my bitter feeble day'.

She then lies down by Admetus, kisses him, and also falls asleep. When 'Admetus' ancient nurse' comes into the room in the morning, she is afraid that both are dead. But Admetus awakens, bewildered but no longer dying, to find Alcestis dead beside him. He vaguely recalls the previous night, and realises that Alcestis has sacrificed herself for him: he has gained the equivocal gift he was seeking. Admetus goes to the council-place, and is welcomed by the people, and the world returns to its usual seasonal pattern: 'And still and still the same the years went by'. However, Time does justice to 'the short-lived loving Queen', so that her reputation survives when 'The shouters round the throne that day' are all dead. The narrator confesses himself in ignorance of Admetus's ultimate fate – 'But either on the earth he ceased to dwell / Or else, oft born again, had many a name'. This does not matter; what is important is that throughout Greece

Alcestis' fame
Grew greater, and about her husband's twined,
Lived, in the hearts of far-off men enshrined.

The narrator does not know if the city of Pherae still exists, but is confident that 'The gods at least remember what is done'. And he too has done his best to keep the memory of Alcestis alive.

The Wanderers, who have listened to the tale, feel 'strange', moved
by the thought of death and their own failures. But they experience ‘sweet content’:

Bitter and sweet so mingled in them both,
Their lives and that old tale, they had been loth,
Perchance to have them told another way. –
So passed the sun from that fair summer day.

In the introductory part of the June section, in which the poem appears, the Wanderers had gone to a house on the river, where an elder had said that the day had been so fine, and the Wanderers appeared so bright, that he could afford to tell them ‘something sad’:

‘Sad, though the life I tell you of passed by,
Unstained by sordid strife or misery;
Sad, because though a glorious end it tells,
Yet on the end of glorious life it dwells,
And striving through all things to reach the best
Upon no midway happiness will rest’.

By the end of the poem, however, sadness is not the only emotion referred to: ‘Bitter and sweet’ together perhaps suggest the ‘midway happiness’ denied at the outset. At all events, the unselfishness of Alcestis and her self-sacrificial love is the focus of the poem, just as it was the quality that had given her precedence in Chaucer’s poem.

Ted Hughes’s ‘new version’ of Euripides’ Alcestis was published in 1999 and first performed by Northern Broadsides in Halifax in 2000. Knowing Hughes as a poet particularly notable for the vigour and power of his writing, and of course a contemporary, and also that his was a play not a poem, I had expected differences of tone and intensity. But the work proved even more different than I had anticipated. In the first place, the action of the play begins quite near the end of Morris’s poem. We are outside the palace in Thessaly, with Apollo telling us of the sad situation within, for which, as he explains in the simplest and most direct language, he is partly responsible:
A woman is dying in this house.
She is giving up her life
So that her husband can live.
And this is the day of her death. (p. 1)

Apollo then recalls how he had been punished by Zeus for killing, in Hughes’s striking phrase, ‘the electro-technocrats, those Titans’ who had killed his son Aesculapius, the healer. Apollo’s punishment had been to be made the slave of King Admetos of Thessaly,

... a remarkable man.
A saviour of his people, an inspired prince.
A man for whom the whole country prays. (p. 2)

Apollo had come respect Admetos, and had arranged for Fate to accept a substitute when his time came to die. But there had been a difficulty: no one had wanted to take his place. Admetos’s parents – ‘Two walking cadavers’ – had refused, and set the example of refusal to others (p. 3). Apollo had not asked Alcestis:

But now you know her story. Of her own accord,
She has volunteered – to give him her life.
And Death has accepted. Hers for his.

All that matters now
Is how Alcestis makes the gift of her life
And dies for her husband
And how he accepts her gift.
This incredible gift of life. (pp. 3–4)

Before this idea can be developed, Death appears, to claim Alcestis.
Apollo pleads with Death to spare her, to no avail:

Man is deluded and his ludicrous gods
Are his delusion. Death is death is death. (p. 7)

Apollo tells Death that another visitor is coming to the house, who will show himself Death’s master, and stalks out. Death roars:

This woman is mine.
And she is mine forever. (p. 8)
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The Chorus enter, asking what is happening in the palace, but close to despair. A Maid confirms that Alcestis's 'women are already busy / Preparing the funeral', and then describes at length the dignity of Alcestis's behaviour in her last hours (p. 11). The Chorus reflect, powerfully, on what her sacrifice will mean for Admetos:

If he had died he would have lost Alcestis.
Now he has lost her anyway.
From now on
As long as he lives, his life will weigh, to the grain,
Just what he paid for it. (p. 14)

The Chorus are then invited in to the death bed. Alcestis is calling on the sun, and can see her native place, Iolchos,

As if I had already left it.
Here before me, and here after me.
As if I had never lived. (p. 17)

She professes her love of Admetos, asking of him only the promise that he will never remarry, which he willingly gives. He makes a long speech in response, which ends with thoughts of Orpheus’s failed attempt to rescue Eurydice from Hades and an appeal to Alcestis:

Wait for me, Alcestis. When I die
We shall lie together forever
And ever and ever and ever.
We shall not be separated then
Till the whole universe crumbles. (p. 23)

The Chorus insist to Admetos that his wife is dead, and try to comfort him. As he moves off carrying the body of Alcestis, he speaks in dignified lament:

Never in my life
Shall I bury anyone
I loved so much, or who loved me more.
She died for me. Let her be honoured
As she deserves. (p. 26)

The Chorus pays tribute to Alcestis:

65
Your death humbled all of us.
Your death
Was your greatest opportunity
And magnificently you took it. (p. 27)

But they conclude chillingly:

Alcestis is dead forever.
How can we say we live in her selfless love?
How can it help anybody now?
We stand in the icy circle of her death. (p. 29)

At this point something happens that takes the story in a different direction from that which Morris had given it: Heracles, the son of Zeus by Alceme and the most famous of the heroes of Greek mythology, comes forcefully onto the scene. He is on his way to carry out one of his famous labours, to steal ‘The man-eating horses of Diomed’. He is a belligerent kind of hero: ‘To tell you the truth – / I have to admit it – I like fighting. It seems to keep me healthy’ (p. 31). Knowing nothing of recent events, he has called to ask for Admetos, an old friend, for hospitality. Admetos – having evidently quickly disposed of the body of Alcestis – welcomes him. Heracles notices that he is in mourning, and asks questions that embarrass Admetos, who evidently wishes to extend hospitality even in these sombre circumstances. Thus he tells Heracles that Alcestis is both alive and dead. Heracles has heard the story that Alcestis has offered to take the place of Admetos in death, and Admetos explains, evasively, that as she is ‘doomed to die’ he cannot think of her as alive; but he will not admit that the death being mourned is hers, and insists that Heracles stay as his guest despite the circumstances, stating that ‘He is my dearest friend’ (p. 35). The Chorus question Admetos’s behaviour, but come to accept accept that ‘Hospitality / Is one of the sacred mysteries’ and that ‘Each misfortune / Bears an opportunity, / Cradles a benefit’ (pp.36–37). They also praise Admetos as ruler of Thessaly, and see this as having entitled him to resist death. He is for them an example of ‘greatness of spirit’ who ‘Turns everything to account’ (p. 38).

Now the burial ceremony proceeds, given a strange discordant atmosphere by the appearance of Pheres, Admetos’s father, who had previously refused to offer his life to save his son. Admetos is indignant
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and angry when he sees him:

You? Get away with your trash.
What are you doing here?
No gift can be better than the giver
And you are worthless.

Your rubbish pollutes her death.
And your grief is meaningless. (p. 40)

He calls his father a 'Rotten-gutted coward' whose 'sacrificial victim' Alcestis was (p. 41). Pheres answers at length, concluding:

The royal power has gone to your head.
That is your problem.
You think you are irreplaceable. (p. 43)

The Chorus tries unsuccessfully to bring the undignified quarrel to an end, but Pheres goes on to call Alcestis 'that poor fool there' for dying to save Admetos, and again calls her 'merely stupid', before leaving with the powerful line: 'I am leaving the killer to hide his victim' (p. 46). Admetos curses his father and mother, and proceeds to the funeral, leaving the Chorus to lament that 'Grief has made him mad' and to compare him to a rat in a trap:

Admetos is trying to gnaw himself
Free from Admetos. Admetos
Is spitting out the torn flesh and the blood
Of Admetos.

Then the devastating question is put: 'What will that leave him with?' (p. 47)

But before any answer can be attempted, a loud voice is heard off-stage, and a Servant announces that Heracles has become 'Crazy drunk in five minutes flat!' and is highly dangerous. A shrieking Maid cries that 'Heracles is killing the lion' and he then enters, garlanded with flowers in Dionysian fashion, with his men Iolaus and Lichas (p. 50), with whom he enacts a supposed lion hunt, and then demonstrates in violent fashion his other successful labours. This takes a good deal of time, and fills the stage with violence and noise. By the time the eleventh labour is reached, Heracles suffers a nightmare, and Iolaus
reminds him of how he had climbed to set free the Titan Prometheus, who knew ‘The secret of the future of God’ (p. 57). He then has a vision of Prometheus on the crag, ‘Arguing with God’ in a powerful conversation:

I freed him to be human.
I broke the chains
That made him the slave of your laws.

To which God replies:

You cut the nerves
That connected him to his own soul. (p. 58)

Heracles tells Prometheus that God has forgiven him – ‘God is a real­ist’ – but the Vulture comes seeking the ‘tremendous secret’ that Prometheus denies knowing. Heracles shoots the Vulture and sets Prometheus free, and then asks to be told the secret. Prometheus insists that ‘The story is ludicrous. It’s a fairy tale’ (p. 60). What it amounts to is that if God has a son by Thetis – by whom he is infatu­ated – ‘The boy will prove greater than his father’. Prometheus believes that all God has to do now is to avoid Thetis and so his fate; thus ‘I am free’. At this point the Vulture reappears to claim Prometheus, but Heracles shoots it again, and it disappears ‘in screeching conflagration’ (p. 62). Prometheus has disappeared, and Heracles finds himself back in Thessaly, drunk and bewildered. The Servants at last manage to break into his world, telling him that he is ‘vandalising the funeral’ of their queen, Alcestis (p. 63).

Heracles is shocked to realise that he had allowed Admetos’s assur­ances to let him ‘carouse and cavort like a clown’. He tears off his gar­lands, ‘suddenly angry and sober’, and asks where the body of Alcestis is (p. 64). He resolves to go to the tomb and fight with Death for Alcestis; his previous labours are trivial compared with the present challenge. Admetos’s ‘loyal friendship’ and ‘kingly behaviour’ deserve this response (p. 66). At this point Admetos enters, stricken with appalling grief, while the Chorus try to comfort him and help him to ‘meet Necessity with a cheerful face’ (p. 72). Now Heracles appears, bearing a veiled woman, whom he eventually manages to persuade an unwilling Admetos, mindful of his promise to Alcestis, to bring into the palace. There she is unveiled, and Admetos comes to the joyful
realisation that Alcestis has been restored to him (pp. 80–81). Heracles
tells how he fought with the God of Death, and ‘trapped his head in a
lock’ (p. 82). Alcestis does not speak, but this is explained:

  Three days of silence.
  It is a small payment.
  Three suns will cleanse her. (p. 82)

Admetos asks Heracles to stay, but he must go onto his next labour.
Admetos calls on his subjects to rejoice, and the Chorus close the play:

  1. Incessantly the gods
     Manipulate the fortunes of mankind –
     Bringing great events
     To conclusions that are unexpected.

  2. Nothing is certain.
     What had seemed inevitable
     Comes to nothing.

  3. And now
     See how God has accomplished
     What was beyond belief.

  1. Let this give man hope. (p. 83)

The emphatic monosyllables bring the play to a mutedly affirmative
ending. Euripides and Hughes have led us from tragedy to the realisa-
tion that on occasion the gods will exert themselves to save humanity
from itself. But the overall experience of the play is by no means reas-
suring: the world it depicts is full of violence and confusion in which
indeed ‘Nothing is certain’.

Elaine Feinstein, in her recent biography of Hughes, locates the
*Alcestis* within the ‘last great flowering of Hughes’s translated poetry’,
along with Wedekind’s *Spring Awakening* and Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*.
She then observes:

In any writer’s hands, the myth is a strange tale, of a king who allows his
wife to die in his place, since no one else can be found who loves him
enough to do so. If Hughes had his own first wife’s death in mind, the
myth is hardly congruent with what we know of Sylvia’s motivation, but in one respect at least there is an echo. It took this biographer back to pondering Hughes’s strange remark, ‘It was her or me’, made to Suzette Macedo.  

Feinstein goes on to quote from Pheres’ critical diatribe against Admetus, which includes the denunciatory words:

You think your life is so priceless
Others must die to preserve it.
You think the entire country
Gets its oxygen only when you breathe in… (p. 43)  

For Feinstein, ‘The singularly literal, plain language makes the point brutally against Hughes himself as someone who has enjoyed a few decades of good fortune and flattery’. That flattery was Hughes’s lot after the death of Plath is hardly the case, but it is certainly true that some of Pheres’ words seem to emerge from those tragic events. When Admetos tries to blame his father for having ‘sucked the life out of Alcestis’, Pheres’ reply is devastating:

You are the cannibal. Only you
Thrive on that feast. Nobody else.
Think of it.
Every day you live she nourishes you
With her dead body.

This can certainly be seen in the context of the self-searching of Hughes’s final years. But Feinstein’s final view is more positive. She refers to the Chorus’s late appeal to Admetos to submit to the rule of necessity, and adds: ‘Hughes may have felt that he had at least managed to do that, even if his own first wife could not be miraculously restored to him by a demigod’.  


That comment can serve to bring us back to Morris. The difference between Hughes's play and Morris's poem is striking – much greater than I had been expecting. The introduction of Heracles totally changes the story and offers new possibilities for the action. The emphasis in this version is less on Alcestis than on Heracles. But it is not hard to account for the difference: the two writers were using different sources; Morris's source was Apollodorus (with, as we shall see, one important omission) while Hughes's source was the playwright Euripides (with some additions). The Euripides play omits the scenes of Apollo in Thessaly, which constitute the first half of Morris's poem, giving us instead the figure of Heracles and his rescue of Alcestis from death, although it does not contain any reference to Prometheus or the Vulture, which Hughes brings in from elsewhere, maybe to add weight to the character and achievement of Heracles. Because of its ending and the extraordinary scene between Admetos and his father, critics have doubted whether the play is a tragedy; moreover, it appears to have been performed at the end of a tragic sequence, when it was usual to have a farce to change the mood. The Victorian critic A. W. Verrall went so far as to argue, in *Euripides the Rationalist*, that the aim of the play was 'neither to solemnise the legend ... nor to embellish it ... but to criticise it, to expose it as fundamentally untrue and immoral'.

In the recent Penguin *Euripides: Medea and Other Plays* Richard Rutherford refers, less controversially, to the 'gentler and unemphatic finale', and concludes that:

Euripides has created a varied and emotionally satisfying play, one which certainly touches on moral questions (especially in the debate between Admetus and Pheres), but which does not treat them with the same painful intensity as in his later and more ambitious dramas.

It seems to me that Hughes's version provides just such an unemphatic finale. Although the sacrifice of Alcestis is at its heart, it is by no means as salient as in the form of the story used by Morris, deriving from Apollodorus. This is his version:

Apollo worked as a laborer for Admetus, king of Pherae, who sought to marry Alcestis, the daughter of Pelias. Pelias had proclaimed that he
would give his daughter to whoever yoked a lion and a boar to a chariot. Apollo yoked them and gave them to Admetus. He, in turn, brought them to Pelias and received Alcestis. While performing sacrifices at his wedding, Admetus forgot to sacrifice to Artemis. For this reason when he opened the marriage bedroom he found it full of coiled snakes. Apollo advised him to propitiate the goddess and asked the Fates, when the time came for Admetus to die, to release him from death, if someone agreed to take his place. When the day appointed for his death came, since neither his father nor his mother wished to die for him, Alcestis died in his stead. Persephone sent her back to earth again or, as some say, Heracles fought Pluto and sent her back to Admetus.19

As we have seen, Morris’s poem follows Apollodorus closely, but it avoids the last movement altogether, omitting both Persephone and Heracles. Even if Morris was unfamiliar with Euripides’ play, he could not have been unaware of the alternative positive conclusions specified by Apollodorus. It would seem, then, that he chose to omit them. Why?

In the notes to his edition of Apollodorus, Richard Simpson gives an account of what he sees as ‘the folk-tale kernel of the play’,20 the situation in which Death is prepared to accept a substitute for the man who is to die, but in which neither of the man’s parents is prepared to make the sacrifice, leaving it to his wife to do so; he also states that variants on the subject include a wrestling match between the husband and Death. Simpson follows D. J. Conacher, whose Euripidean Drama he quotes, in suggesting that ‘The introduction of Heracles, the outside agent, may well be a Euripidean innovation’.21 For Conacher, Euripides’ ending opens up ‘a whole new dimension, full of significant psychological and ethical possibilities’;22 but does it? It is surely arguable that it has the opposite effect, in leading us away from the central relationship of Admetus and Alcestis. It is that relationship that has been seen by critics, in my view rightly, as the emotional crux of Morris’s poem.

But some other aspects of the poem have so far perhaps been underemphasised. The first is what may be termed the political, the attention given at several points in the narrative to ideas of the good society. Morris’s Admetus is a more admirable character than Euripides’, in part because of the quality of his rule in Pherae. The point is clear in a
passage already quoted:

In all things grew his wisdom and his wealth,
And folk beholding the fair state and health
Wherein his land was, said, that now at last
A fragment of the Golden Age was cast
Over the place, for there was no debate
And men forgot the very name of hate.

One of the clearest expressions of this evaluation of Admetus comes, in roundabout way, in William Clyde de Vane’s *A Browning Handbook* when he is discussing Browning’s 1871 poem *Balaustion’s Adventure*, which incorporates a retelling of Euripides’ play by the eponymous central character. De Vane remarks that ‘It is quite likely ... that Browning took a line for his own version from Morris’s treatment of the tale’.23 In Browning’s version, Admetos is able to ‘reign a righteous king’. De Vane remarks that Morris’s Admetus is ‘a simple and industrious king, kind and affectionate to his wife and family’.24 He simply accepts his fate, recognising what Alcestis has done for him. ‘Her fame spreads through all the world, but in Morris’s tale no Hercules came and Alcestis was not brought back to life. Of all possible plots, Morris’s simple one does the character of Alcestis, as well as that of Admetus, most honour’.25 Browning’s poem ends with a striking deliberate anachronism which draws attention to further Victorian interest in the Alcestis story. Belaustion pays tribute to ‘a great Kaunian painter’ who has made ‘a picture of it all’; the reference is to the Brownings’ friend Frederick Leighton, who exhibited his *Heracles Struggling with Death for the Life of Alcestis* at the Royal Academy in 1871.

We may discern a wider version of this political concern in the theme which J. M. S. Tompkins, in her thoughtful exposition of *The Earthly Paradise*, discovers in Apollo’s song quoted in full earlier in this article. She remarks that the song is a version of a common theme of the whole poem: ‘men ignore and destroy the wide general happiness offered by fruitful earth and natural life, and make their own restless misery’.26
O dwellers on the lovely earth,
Why will ye break your rest and mirth
To weary us with fruitless prayer...

O fools! and if ye could but know
How fair a world to you is given.

To what a heaven the earth might grow
If fear beneath the earth were laid,
If hope failed not, nor love decayed.

We can certainly see the song as an early and beautiful expression of Morris’s concern with the earth and what it might mean for humanity. One of the few early reviewers who had been less than delighted by The Earthly Paradise when it first appeared had been the Christian critic G. W. Cox, writing in The Edinburgh Review in January 1871. Cox observed that ‘the music of this Earthly Paradise is mournful because it is so earthly’, finding in all the tales ‘the same thought that gladness is only gladness because it is dogged by decay and change’. It is indeed true that the world that we are shown in The Earthly Paradise is one in which fear is prominent, hope often fails, and love often decays. But it is characteristic of Morris to be ‘earthly’, as he turned away from religious consolation. At this stage of his life, however, he was uncertain, searching for ways in which to negotiate the relationship between hope and reality. This impression is consonant with Tompkins’s conclusion, that the poem is fragmentary, not unified. The passages she has quoted are described as ‘straws on the wind ... They point forward and back, and record the play of the speculative imagination rather than an accepted conviction’. We do not know what to make of Admetus’s quest for immortality: it ‘ennobles him and benefits his subjects; it also estranges him from common existence; it may also be delusive’. Nevertheless Tompkins feels that the story contributes something significant to the reader’s awareness of the ‘spiritual weather in which The Earthly Paradise was written’. The resolution of Morris’s quest was to come later, in the late romances and in Ellen’s words to Guest near the end of News from Nowhere: ‘The earth and the growth of it and the life of it! If I could but say or show how I love it’
Here the words actually succeed in conveying what they say cannot be expressed; but in Apollo's song, written a decade before Morris's conversion to Socialism, the feeling so beautifully conveyed is of aspiration rather than confidence.

Let us turn finally to aspects of the poem's sexual politics. A passage referred to briefly in my summary concerned the interrupted wedding-night of Admetus and Alcestis. Fiona MacCarthy makes a strong case for the power of this part of the poem. She remarks that Morris's poetry of this period, the late 1860s, confronts his readers with 'extraordinary images of fear, pain, impotence and sexual disarray', and argues that the scene in 'The Love of Alcestis' is the 'most powerful of all'. The scene as described by Admetus to Apollo, when the serpent that springs up to separate the lovers is said to offer Morris's most disturbing monster: 'This is much the worst one because it is so slithery and sexually threatening, the nightmare, even in pre-Freudian days, of any bride':

A huge dull-gleaming dreadful coil that rolled
In changing circles on the pavement fair.

And next the coils I met her grey eyes, glazed
With sudden horror most unspeakable.

'They coil about me now, my lips to kiss.
O love, why hast thou brought me unto this?'

The bridegroom is humiliated, remaining outside the chamber 'Like a scourged hound, until the dawn of day'. MacCarthy concludes:

Morris tells the story as a dark and complete fairytale, loaded with the symbolism of how passion turns to ashes. There are undertones of female frigidity, the ultimate *vagina dentata* syndrome. The poet explicates the treachery of expectation: even at the point of consummation the hope of happiness is cruelly whisked away.

We may wish to go on to consider whether this is an arbitrary occurrence, or whether it is to be accounted for psychologically – assuming that a modern reader does not feel satisfied by the narrator's explanation of it as the result of neglected rituals; though we may reasonably see this as symbolic of the need for social control over male sexuality.
In his 1979 discussion of the poem, Frederick Kirchhoff remarks that 'the summer stories reflect the increasing seriousness of Morris's thought and his growing skill as a storyteller'. Admetus is 'a more complex figure than anyone in the spring stories'; his quests, for Alcestis and for continuing life, are 'ambivalent gestures'. Kirchhoff interestingly describes him as 'an overreacher' who, in marrying Alcestis, principally seeks his own glory. The serpent that MacCarthy finds so powerful is said to be not merely the messenger of Artemis (who had been ignored in the sacrifices), but also a judgment on 'Admetus's own impetuous attempt to seize a woman whom he as yet conceives as a token of his own prowess rather than an independent human being'. This helps to prepare us for the poem's conclusion in which, as Kirchhoff accurately observes, 'Despite his preternatural longevity and the success of his reign, it is not Admetus but Alcestis who is honoured by subsequent generations'.

For Alcestis is clearly the character finally celebrated in Morris's poem, and her death gives both poignancy and weight to the conclusion. In *The Pastoral Vision of William Morris* Blue Calhoun accurately remarks that although Admetus has most attention in the poem, and is presented as a good steward and ruler, 'the story operates to qualify his success'. For Alcestis embodies the ideal of perfect love as, in the words of Florence Boos, 'sublimation and self-sacrifice'. Thus she is a traditional heroine rather than a likely feminist icon. Her final words, addressed to her sleeping husband, after the decision to sacrifice herself, are given thus by Morris:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{'Thou sleepest: O wake not, nor speak to me!} \\
\text{In silence let my last hour pass away,} \\
\text{And men forget my bitter feeble day.'}
\end{align*}
\]

But the bitterness of this is not continued in the following lines of the narrative:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{With that she laid her down upon the bed,} \\
\text{And nestling to him, kissed his weary head,} \\
\text{And laid his wasted hand upon her breast,} \\
\text{Yet woke him not; and silence and deep rest} \\
\text{Fell on the chamber.}
\end{align*}
\]
The peacefulness of this attests to the strength of Alcestis's love, and for the reader this mitigates the desolation of her speech. The poem ends, as we know, by contradicting her wish to be forgotten; it is she whose remembrance comes to surpass that of Admetus, even if it is 'about her husband's twined'; and, by an irony that Alcestis can hardly be supposed to be aware of, her sacrifice serves to suggest the selfishness of Admetus's desire for immortality. Perhaps also we may wonder about Apollo's encouragement of this desire, especially as it was he who had earlier advised Admetus:

'Behold, today thou hast felicity,
But the times change, and I can see a day
When all thine happiness shall fade away;
And yet be merry, strive not with the end!
Thou canst not change it...'

At this stage in *The Earthly Paradise*, nothing is simple, nothing is resolved. Nevertheless it is poetry's role to keep alive the memory of noble human behaviour like that of Alcestis, and perhaps also of behaviour based on mistaken ambitions, like that of Admetus. But there is no role in Morris's world, now or later, for a Heracles who can overcome the power of Death.

NOTES

11. I have used the 1903 edition of *The Earthly Paradise*, published by Longmans, Green, and Co. in London for this and all subsequent quotations from 'The Love of Alcestis', which is given there on pp. 128-40. But as not all readers will be using this edition (which does not give line numbers), I give no further page references.
15. Feinstein, p. 238.
16. Feinstein, p. 239. Feinstein also notes here that the dialogue that Hughes gives between Prometheus and God is 'entirely Hughes's interpolation'; in English literature, Prometheus is best known as the sufferer for humanity in Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* (1820).

24. de Vane, p. 356.
25. de Vane, p. 357.
28. Tompkins, p. 120.
35. Boos, p. 92.