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Abstract

Classical Athenian tragedy is often thought of as a genre of poetry about death. Its plots center on the deaths—violent, untimely, self-inflicted, or brought about by unwitting *philoï*—of certain individuals who dominate the plays in which they appear: Agamemnon, Ajax, Oedipus, Antigone, Pentheus, Hippolytus, Heracles. Drawing its audience into the experience of those characters, tragedy forces that audience to look death in the face, to learn what it might be like to see death coming or to be overtaken by it suddenly, to choose and welcome death or to fight it unsuccessfully. But no more than any other genre can tragedy actually represent the experience of death. However skillfully the poet may build a link of identification between spectator and character, that link is severed with the character's life and the spectator is given a vicarious experience: the opportunity to make sense of someone else's death. This might be viewed as a limitation of the genre—although it is a limitation shared with the human imagination itself, which can never really envision what it is like to die—or, alternatively, as its proper business, for tragedy is arguably as much about the experience of surviving others' deaths as it is about dying.

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The Survivors' Song:
The Drama of Mourning in Euripides' *Alcestis*

SHEILA MURNAGHAN

Classical Athenian tragedy is often thought of as a genre of poetry about death. Its plots center on the deaths—violent, untimely, self-inflicted, or brought about by unwitting *philoï*—of certain individuals who dominate the plays in which they appear: Agamemnon, Ajax, Oedipus, Antigone, Pentheus, Hippolytus, Heracles. Drawing its audience into the experience of those characters, tragedy forces that audience to look death in the face, to learn what it might be like to see death coming or to be overtaken by it suddenly, to choose and welcome death or to fight it unsuccessfully. But no more than any other genre can tragedy actually represent the experience of death. However skillfully the poet may build a link of identification between spectator and character, that link is severed with the character's life and the spectator is given a vicarious experience: the opportunity to make sense of someone else's death. This might be viewed as a limitation of the genre—although it is a limitation shared with the human imagination itself, which can never really envision what it is like to die—or, alternatively, as its proper business, for tragedy is arguably as much about the experience of surviving others' deaths as it is about dying.

This focus on survival is promoted by tragedy's formal characteristics. Greek tragedy is notable for the mediated, indirect way in which it presents death and other forms of violence and suffering. It keeps those experiences of *pathos* offstage and informs us of them through the reports of witnesses, foregrounding the activities of observing, describing, and responding to the deaths of others. It is through the responses of survivors that the audience of tragedy knows death. This form of knowledge is instructively thematized by a moment in Euripides' *Alcestis*, the play on which this discussion will focus. As the chorus enters, they are wondering whether the death of Alcestis, scheduled for that day, has yet taken place, and they seek an answer by scrutinizing the outside of the house of Admetus for signs of mourning. They listen for wails and the sound of hands striking breasts; they look for lustral water outside the gates; they examine the doorways for hung-up locks of hair (*Alc.* 77–111). Death is here presented as a

phenomenon of the unseen world within the house, to be experienced indirectly through the rituals performed by survivors.

Death rituals are, as is well known, an integral feature of tragedy. The poetic genre of lamentation, the *threnos*, is one of tragedy's probable sources, and the performance of funerary ritual is an important element in tragic plots.¹ Tragic incidents are built on attempts to prohibit burial, as in Aeschylus' lost *Eleusinioi*, Sophocles' *Antigone* and *Ajax*, and Euripides' *Supplikes*; tragic characters confront each other over the question of who may and who may not properly take part in a given funeral.² A major issue in tragedy is the proper extent of mourning, and characters often try to limit displays of grief, whether in exasperation, like Eteocles in Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes*, or in tender concern, like Theseus in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, or in self-exoneration, like Oedipus at the end of Euripides' *Phoenissae*.

Mourning is not only a source for the language and action of tragedy; it is also a suggestive analogue through which tragedy defines its social function and its relationship to the traumatic experiences it represents.³ Like tragedy, mourning involves the imitation of death, but not its actual enactment. A mourner expresses his or her attachment to the dead person and compassion for what that person has suffered through gestures of self-destruction and by renouncing the normal experiences of life. As Aristotle evidently put it in his lost *Symposium*, the ritual actions of mourning reflect *homopatheia*, "sympathy," with the dead: "For in sympathy with the dead we disfigure ourselves, by cutting our hair and by taking off wreaths"—wreaths being a marker of vitality and plenitude (fr. 101 Rose = Ath. 15. 675a). But the experience of sympathy is not the same as the experience of death itself, and the mourner's departure from life is essentially theatrical. Like an actor's imitation of suffering, it has limits in time and space. Those gestures of self-destruction stop short at the outer surface of the body. A necessary feature of mourning is the mourner's eventual recovery and return to normal life, the experience of working through grief, the acceptance of survival.

Like an actor, a mourner is a duplicitous figure, one who imitates death, but with a living voice, who testifies to death, but cannot help still being alive. In that he or she experiences a bond of sympathy with the dead but does not follow him or her to the bitter end, the mourner is also like the spectator of a play. This aspect of spectatorship is also recognized by Aristotle, who in the *Poetics* locates the spectator's response to tragedy in a sense that the character who suffers is *homoios*, "like oneself" (*Poet.*

¹ On lamentation for dead heroes as a possible source of tragedy, see Seaford 1994: 142 and passim. On the extensive role of lament within tragedy, see C. P. Segal 1993: 13–20.

² Roberts 1993.

³ In this respect, mourning has a secular counterpart in the legal trial, which is also both a source for the language and action of tragedy and a model for the way tragic representation works. See Murnaghan, forthcoming.

1453a5–6), and whose defense of tragedy rests on the parallel between the spectator's limited experience of *pathos* and the play's limited depiction of it.⁴

When mourning is actually labeled "theatrical," as it often is, the effect is usually to characterize it as somehow excessive. This sense of mourning as excessive points to a disproportion between the dead person's complete and irrevocable loss of life, which cuts off all experience and self-expression and thus obliterates identity, and the mourner's more limited loss, which leaves him or her still able to command our notice through words and actions. Because he or she is still alive to perform them, the mourner's sufferings inevitably take center stage; in doing so, they displace the starker loss experienced by the dead in a way that evokes the bad faith associated with theatricality.⁵

Tragedy is, then, a song of survivors, a rehearsal of the inescapable human experience—as universal as death itself—of being alive when others have died. It concerns itself with the various ways in which human beings construe that experience, the connections they make between the death of one and the continued life of another. One connection that inevitably gets made is a causal one: Those who survive are understood to live because others have died and thus to live at others' expense. This sense of indebtedness to the dead can be alarming, inspiring feelings of unease or "survivor guilt," and that unease may be addressed by aligning the mere distinction between the living and the dead with other distinctions. Those who die are marked out by exceptional greatness or exceptional criminality, often by both at once: thus the tragic concern with the figure of the hero, whose existence realizes its meaning in a particular form of death. A heroic death has meaning in the context of cults and rituals that turn it into a communal event, so that the hero's death is tied into the survival not of individuals but of whole communities, which may be rid of pollution by the sacrifice of a scapegoat or fortified in their joint endeavors by the powers emanating from the burial place of a local cult hero.

The distinction between the figure who dies a tragic death and everyone else may be described in the parallel terms of politics rather than of religion, expressed as a matter of class rather than of a special relationship to the gods. Thus several recent studies of tragedy have noted that in tragedy those who die are construed as aristocrats, those who live on as members of a democratic collectivity. Mark Griffith in his study of the *Oresteia*, "Brilliant Dynasts," suggests that the relationship of the many ordinary but unendangered characters of tragedy, including the chorus, to the high-placed

⁴ See Murnaghan 1995. On the way mourning within tragedy both reflects and shapes the audience's response, also with reference to Aristotle's *Poetics*, see C. P. Segal 1993: 25–29.

⁵ In an important comparative study of mourning as the "prototype experience" (5) of tragedy, S. L. Cole 1985 defines the duplicitous position of the mourner in terms of the psychological condition of ambivalence. On mourning as a central element in both Greek and Irish tragedy, see Macintosh 1994: 158–82.

protagonists may have echoed that of most audience members to the Athenian elite of their own day. Those audience members may have admired the risky, high-stakes life of the elite and seen it as beneficial to them, but they were content to observe it from a position of safer obscurity.⁶ Richard Seaford, in *Ritual and Reciprocity*, stresses even more strongly the audience's positive stake in differentiating itself from the dying hero. In his interpretation, the democratic polis, which created tragedy and with which tragedy is aligned, stands only to gain from the death of the aristocratic hero. The polis is constituted in the act of lamenting the hero, so that shared mourning is the very basis of community; yet the hero's death is not really a loss to the community that laments him, for such deaths make democracy possible, removing powerful individuals with anti-social private interests from the city.

But it is not only in the case of extraordinary, distinguished individuals that death is given meaning through a link to the survival of the community. In the related genre of the public funeral oration, the deaths of many, anonymous soldiers are justified through their preservation of the polis. Even the most private losses can be placed in the consoling context of the continuity of some larger group or institution, if not the city then the household or the family, through which death becomes linked to a natural process of regeneration. For survivors to understand themselves as part of a community is consoling both because it gives them the fellowship of fellow-mourners, which makes death easier to bear, and because it makes the experience of survival seem less self-interested. By being one of a group of many survivors, one participates in and testifies to the something larger that another's death somehow serves. Tragedy could offer its audience an experience of this consolation, binding them together for the duration of the performance as the fellow witnesses of someone else's death, guided in part by the collective responses of on-stage survivors, particularly the chorus.

In his dramatizations of the survivor's condition, Euripides, as might be expected, tends to place such soothing formulations under question. He repeatedly contrives situations that bring out the most troubling aspects of survival, situations in which the interest of survivors in the deaths of others is played up and in which it is hard to accept individuals' deaths as a necessary aspect of communal life. He depicts circumstances, at once poignant and bizarre, in which characters are the grieving survivors of deaths they have themselves brought about. This is the experience of Medea—and arguably of Jason—in the *Medea*, of Theseus in the *Hippolytus*, of Agave in the *Bacchae*, and of Heracles in the *Heracles*. And he has a well-known interest in plots of voluntary self-sacrifice, in which

⁶ Griffith 1995: 73–75, 119–23. Griffith captures well both the duplicitous theatricality of mourning and its connection to the ongoing life of the community when he writes (122), “The great man or woman of tragedy, ‘one of those in great reputation and prosperity,’ makes mistakes, comes (or almost comes) to spectacular and paradigmatic ruin, is loudly and ostentatiously lamented—but is survived by a relieved (even strengthened?) community.”

those who will survive negotiate in advance with those whom they will outlive and from whose deaths they will benefit.⁷ In many of those plays, such as the *Heracleidae*, the *Phoenissae*, and the *Iphigenia at Aulis*, this sacrifice is undertaken on behalf of a political community of some sort and particular stress is placed on the questionable merit of those who represent that community.

This discussion will focus on a play that concerns a more private case of self-sacrifice, the *Alcestis*, in which Euripides addresses the meaning of survival in the more personal context of the *oikos*. The *oikos* is the site where public and private interests meet and where, through the institutions of marriage and *xenia*, personal relations become the basis of larger communal structures, and thus the site in which individuals might be expected to experience most immediately the value of collective continuity.⁸ Despite the doubt cast on its generic identity by its pro-satyrical position in its original tetralogy, the *Alcestis* displays a particularly strong engagement with the fundamentally tragic and un-satyrical problem of how best to represent death in drama. In this play, Euripides seems fascinated by the challenge of depicting death, experimenting with two, contrasting strategies: the personified, allegorical figure who appears at the beginning of the play, talks to Apollo, and then enters the house; and the remarkable scene in which Alcestis, in dialogue with Admetus, voices her awareness that she is losing her hold on life (244–392). The myth he dramatizes may have a happy ending, but in that respect it resembles the Euripidean tragedies whose plots are cogently epitomized in the title of Anne Burnett's study, *Catastrophe Survived*, and it is a myth that especially foregrounds the nature of survival.

The myth of Admetus, a man who is given the chance to live if he can find another to die in his place, provides Euripides with an ideal medium for exploring survival as a self-interested experience. Here the link that may haunt the imagination of the guilt-prone is real: Admetus does outlive Alcestis only as a result of her death. The condition that people normally have to grapple with once it has happened to them becomes something that did not just happen but was purposefully sought and arranged in advance. As survival is actually negotiated before the fact, the consoling rationales that are usually invoked after the fact, the reasons offered why death is acceptable, appear as possible motivations to be considered by those who are candidates for voluntary death. This repositioning of reasons for accepting a past death as reasons for seeking a future death has discordant results that have contributed to the difficulty that modern readers at least have had in making sense of the play. Euripides takes considerations that make death understandable from a distance and asks what it would be like if

⁷ Wilkins 1990.

⁸ On the salvation of the house of Admetus as "the subject of the play," see Burnett 1983: 268.

people tried to take them into account in the immediate event. The result is a kind of comedy of ideas,⁹ in which ideas are entertained under conditions in which they were never meant to be; they become elements in a dramatic human situation rather than retrospective commentary on it and are, in this way, subjected to a strange and rigorous scrutiny.¹⁰

One of the most prevalent ways in which the positive social value of survivors is understood is through their potential fertility, their ability not just to enjoy the light of the sun but to replenish the community.¹¹ A famous classical expression of this view comes towards the end of Pericles' funeral oration, where Thucydides has Pericles exhort the surviving parents of the fallen to have more children (Thuc. 2. 44, transl. by Steven Lattimore):

But those still of age to have children must take strength from hopes of other sons. On the personal level, those who come later will be a means of forgetting those who are no more, and the city will benefit doubly, both in not being left short and in security; for it is not possible for men to counsel anything fair or just if they are not at risk by staking their sons equally.

Begetting children both gives survivors a useful purpose and reconnects them to the community, bringing them a renewed similarity to its other members and a renewed stake in its welfare.

In the *Alcestis*, as survival becomes a matter of calculation, this positive effect of survival recurs in the weird and distasteful form of a possible qualification. Both *Alcestis* and *Admetus* criticize *Pheres*, *Admetus*' father and first choice for dying in his place, for choosing to survive even though he fails to meet this qualification. In her first speech to *Admetus*, *Alcestis* points out that she is dying even though she is the wrong age for it and *Admetus*' parents, being old, are at the right age and have no hope of producing other children (290–94). Later, *Admetus* sarcastically suggests to *Pheres* that perhaps he should beget some more children to look after him in his old age since he is unwilling to preserve *Admetus* (662–64).

Thus presented, this is hardly an appealing concept, and indeed it does not appeal at all to *Pheres*. In general he, along with the other main

⁹ On Euripidean drama as a theater of "ideas rather than character," and especially of difficult and contradictory ideas, see Arrowsmith 1968. Goldfarb 1992 develops Arrowsmith's approach in relation to the *Alcestis*, focusing on the conflict between *philia* and *xenia*.

¹⁰ This is by no means an effect found exclusively in the *Alcestis*, but is quite characteristic of Euripides. Another example is the point in the *Andromache* at which *Andromache* claims to have nursed *Hector*'s bastards "to avoid giving him annoyance" (224–25). As Ann Michelini comments (1987: 92–93), "Andromache's expression of . . . virtue takes a form that is extreme and even bizarre. . . . The audience would agree that women should not do anything to annoy their husbands, but *Andromache* puts this old saw into action in a way that is likely to surprise them." On this passage, see also *Justina Gregory*'s discussion in her paper in this volume, pp. 67–69.

¹¹ For a cross-cultural account of the widespread connections between death rituals and the affirmation of fertility, and especially the regeneration of the social order, see Bloch and Parry 1982: 1–44. On actions designed to promote fertility in ancient Greek funerary ritual, see *Alexiou* 1974: 9.

characters, instinctively repudiates the kinds of considerations that are supposed to make death palatable. Like characters in other Euripidean plays who resist the inherited mythological plots in which they are expected to take part (for example, Ion in the *Ion* or Phaedra in the *Hippolytus*), the main characters of the *Alcestis* resist the social plot of death in the interest of others. Pheres explicitly rejects the idea that there is some law or logic by which fathers should actively promote the succession of the generations by making way for their sons. There is no such *nomos*, he says (683–84), and it is not Greek, οὐδ' Ἑλληνικόν.

Admetus, having arranged to outlive Alcestis, refuses to acknowledge any benefit to doing so. He claims to be as good as dead and worse off than Alcestis, and he declines to pursue the continued flourishing of his household which would, in theory, give her death some purpose. Far from seeing it as a benefit, he reconceives her choice to die as a betrayal, begging her several times not to abandon him (202, 250, 275; cf. Theseus at *Hipp.* 1456) and rails at his *daimon* for depriving him of her (384). In voicing these sentiments, Admetus is replicating widespread conventions of lamentation,¹² but his peculiar circumstances bring out the element of absurdity latent in those conventions. That her “betrayal” has come at his request highlights the way mourners typically carry their disproportionate concern with their own suffering even to the point of presenting themselves as, not only less fortunate than the person mourned, but actually his or her victim.¹³

Alcestis herself negates the supposed value of her death through the condition she attaches to it. She demands a kind of freeze on the household through Admetus' promise never to marry again and thus never to have more children, making him in effect the kind of dangerously disconnected survivor that Pericles in the Funeral Oration seeks to avoid. The idea that to remarry is a way of turning survival into a constructive experience may be validated by the eventual outcome of the plot, in which Admetus disobeys this promise, but it also receives a jarring expression in the taunt of Pheres that Admetus has discovered the key to immortality because he can simply keep on persuading wives to die for him (699–701); this point is recapitulated even more bitterly in the exhortation, μνήστευε πολλάς, ὡς θάνωσι πλείονες, “court many women, so that even more can die” (720). None of these characters can really accept the idea that one person should die for the benefit of another who will justify the sacrifice by serving a larger social purpose, and it is no wonder that Pheres hotly proposes to Admetus: “Don't you die for me and I won't die for you” (690).

All of these responses contribute to the strange and off-putting, even unnatural, impression these characters have perennially made on readers of

¹² Alexiou 1974: 124, 163–64, 176, 182–84; Garland 1985: 30–31, 142–43.

¹³ Alexiou notes that “the lament of the tragic hero or heroine for his own fate or death accounts for a high proportion of the laments in Greek tragedy” (1974: 113, 227 n. 29).

the play. Pheres seems selfish and short-sighted for a loving father; Alcestis cold and demanding for someone making a voluntary sacrifice; Admetus weak and self-pitying for someone whose life is supposedly worth saving. Yet these responses are quite understandable—one might even say quite natural—under the circumstances. It is the circumstances that are bizarre, contrived, and magical, but also an effective medium for bringing to light and examining the ideas that people have and need to have about the meaning of death for those who are still living. Euripides' evident interest in using drama to investigate and question human modes of sense-making suggests that the play should not be read primarily as a character study—an approach that certainly yields disappointing results. The distortions of character found in all the main figures are better understood as illustrating the gap between understandable human reactions and the interpretations cast on experience after the fact in order to make it bearable.¹⁴

While the position of the survivor is critiqued, even satirized, through these discordant effects, the *Alcestis* also acknowledges that it is an inescapable role and one which it is itself meant to represent and support. For all of Euripides' experimentation in this play with ways of representing death itself, it is the task of surviving rather than the experience of dying that emerges as the real focus of attention and chief source of pity and concern, even before Alcestis' death actually happens. The characters themselves, even if they resist the ways in which survival is justified, all seem to understand this. Alcestis herself, when she explains to Admetus why she has chosen to die, offers a quick, dispassionate statement that she made her choice *σε πρεσβεύουσα*, "putting you first" (282), and then goes on to add that she did not wish to survive him: *οὐκ ἠθέλησα ζῆν ἀποσπασθεῖσα σου*, "I did not wish to live deprived of you" (287). To her, being a survivor is so wretched that she would rather die (a view echoed by Admetus' later claim at 935–40 that she is better off than he). After her death, Pheres acknowledges to Admetus that Alcestis has done him a service by sparing him the same wretched experience of outliving Admetus she has shunned for herself: "She did not allow me to waste away in grievous old age deprived of you" (621–22).

Before she dies, Alcestis joins the collective effort to get Admetus to look beyond his grief,¹⁵ assuring him that time will soften it and proclaiming her soon-to-be-dead self a nothing, a non-consideration: *οὐδὲν ἔσθ' ὁ καθανών*, "one who dies is nothing" (381). Given a voice even as she is essentially dead, she uses it to reinforce this exonerating vision, announcing that *ὡς οὐκέτ' οὔσαν οὐδὲν ἂν λέγοις ἐμέ*, "you might speak

¹⁴ For further arguments against reading the play as a character study, see Dale 1954: xxii–xxiii; Goldfarb 1992; Gregory 1979, esp. 260, where she states that the real subject of the play is the nature of death.

¹⁵ On the play as an account of Admetus' experience of working through grief, with an emphasis on the gender reversal involved in his mourning, see C. P. Segal 1992.

of me as not being anything anymore” (387), and departing life with the words, οὐδέν εἰμ’ ἔτι, “I am no longer anything” (390).

Alcestis’ insistence on her own status as a nonentity paves the way for Admetus’ disregard of her. This occurs first in the form of his denial to Heracles that an important death has taken place in his house, which is feigned and insincere but nonetheless telling and proleptic. Alcestis’ loss of importance is anticipated through her replacement in Admetus’ deceptive account by a relative nonentity in social terms, an unrelated orphan. But it is expressed in a dismissive phrase which, by its reliance on tautology, reveals how little there is to be said of the dead in general and thus how little claim they have on us: τεθνᾶσιν οἱ θανόντες, “the dead are dead” (541).¹⁶ Later Admetus goes even further to turn the nothingness of the dead into a benefit, arguing that Alcestis is better off than he because οὐδὲν ἄλγος, “no pain,” seizes her (937).¹⁷ At the play’s end, the silence—or, more accurately, the prohibition on being heard—imposed on Alcestis as she returns (1143–47) reflects the nonexistence of the dead wife that has allowed Admetus to embrace the ostensibly new one.¹⁸

Moving Admetus through and beyond grief is also the project of the chorus, which focuses on his plight even before it is realized. As early as the first stasimon, they are calling on Apollo to find μηχανάν τιν’ Ἀδμήτῳ κἀκῶν, “a way out of his troubles for Admetus” (221), and they come to the sententious conclusion that marriage brings more pain than pleasure by citing “our king, who by losing the best of wives will lead a non-life” (241–43). They promise they will help him bear his sorrow φίλος φίλῳ, “as friend to friend” (369), extending the same kind of sympathy to a grieving survivor that a tragic audience might. As soon as Alcestis does die, the chorus gets to work exhorting Admetus to bear up, reminding him that he is not the first or last to lose a wife (894–97). Here they are aligned with the trajectory of the plot, which also works to move Admetus beyond his attachment to the dead. An offstage funeral ceremony is recapitulated in the odder, but essentially parallel onstage action, in which Admetus’ reviving ties to the larger community are activated by the arrival of his friend Heracles. This in turn leads to Admetus’ agreement to construct a new tie by taking on a new wife, only to be rewarded for this by the restoration of the one he lost.

¹⁶ See Conacher’s comment (1988: ad loc.), “surely rather a shocking statement, even allowing for its possibly ‘formulaic’ nature,” which captures well the way in which Euripides manages to bring out the disturbing truths that lurk in comfortable formulas.

¹⁷ Charles Segal connects the negative unrepresentability of death as revealed in this play to the marble statue of Alcestis that Admetus plans to make (1991: 224).

¹⁸ As Betts 1965 shows, Alcestis is in the position of the *deuteropotmos*, a person falsely reported dead for whom a funeral has been performed. Until that person underwent a mock rebirth, “his existence was ignored as much as possible because, technically, he did not exist” (182). For further comments on Alcestis’ position between life and death, see Buxton 1987: 19–23.

An important step in this process of moving beyond grief is Admetus' concealment from Heracles of Alcestis' death. This concealment involves representing Alcestis' death in a displaced form, through the invented death of another, unrelated woman. Admetus' deceit here is not only a key element in his return to normal life; it is also a sign of nobility. Although Admetus feels he must apologize to Heracles for hiding Alcestis' misfortune (1038), Heracles has praised him for it (856–57): “Although oppressed by grave misfortune, he hid it, being noble (ἐκρυπτε δ' ὦν γενναῖος), out of respect for me (αἰδεσθεὶς ἐμέ).” Hiding death in deference to the ongoing ties of the larger social world, here represented though the aristocratic relation of *xenia*, becomes a crucial element in the tragic plot—as it is a constituent feature of tragic representation in general.

Heracles learns of Admetus' noble duplicity from a loyal servant, who is offended by Heracles' inopportune merry-making. Before Heracles enters, the servant voices his sense of outrage in terms that provide an implicit comment on the nature of tragic representation. He complains that there are now in the house of Admetus δισσὰ . . . μέλη κλύειν, “two songs to hear” (760), one the lament of the servants who mourn their dead mistress, the other the drunken song that Heracles is, as the servant puts it, ἄμουσ' ὑλακτῶν, “tunelessly braying” (760). The overall context of the play suggests that tragedy is not and cannot be only the song of death that the servant approves of. It is a double song, replicating the inevitable duplicity of the survivors who are its audience and its most numerous characters, mixing the representation of death with the possibly discordant, but nonetheless powerful song of the living.¹⁹

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¹⁹ The link between these two songs is reinforced by the fact that, in tragedy, it is lament that is typically designated tuneless or unmusical. See C. P. Segal 1993: 16–17.