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Leshu Torchin

“So then Dr. Frooyd said that all I needed to do was to cultivate a few inhibitions and get some sleep.”

— from Anita Loos’ *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*

Leshu Torchin, fearing that the lull after completing her undergraduate education—and before continuing with an as yet unspecified graduate program—would be too much to bear, is preparing for a transcontinental move to Washington, D.C. In her own words: “Between preparing for this move and watching almost every movie ever made, I have very little time to write amusing and informative autobiographical notes.”

Transgression and Limits in Euripides' *Alkestis*

This paper seeks to understand Euripides' *Alkestis* in the terms of the transgression described by both Michel Foucault and Longinus. The first section explores transgression as a process that erases the prior limits in order to reconstruct and redefine them. During this process, limits and boundaries are stripped away. A period of horror and liminality ensues in which the meaning of boundaries comes into question. The second section examines the positionality of death as the primary limit that frames the events of the tragedy. The third section explores the deteriorating functionality of the gender roles held by Admetus and Alkestis. During this time, other structures dependent upon adherence to this categorization as well as the characterization of death also fall apart. The final section works to determine Herakles' role as an embodiment of transgression demonstrating how this figure of liminality re-establishes the lost limits of the drama.

Herakles: Being and Non-Being are considered different things.

Admetus: That is your opinion, Herakles, not mine.

Aristotle once wrote of Euripides, "Whatever other faults of organization he may have, at least he makes the most tragic impression of all poets" (Halliwell, Ch. 13). Richmond Lattimore describes him as only "moderately successful in his own lifetime" while dedicated to writing "shockers" (5). Different Euripidean critics and classical scholars have noted Euripides' tendency to play with social and dramatic conventions; R.P. Winnington-Ingram writes "Euripides was a poet of

the avant-garde” (Winnington-Ingram). Other critics have described him as atheistic and impious. Certainly the turbulence in his many plots and the uneasy reactions of his audiences could easily account for Euripides’ classification as a marginal or even inferior tragedian. Yet one must remember that as much as Euripides disturbed he also pleased; he received prizes for his plays and his work has lasted alongside the other tragedians considered great—Aeschylus and Sophokles. Indeed the plot of Aristophanes’ *Frogs* concerns the selection of the best playwright (after Sophokles); the two contestants for this honor are Aeschylus and Euripides. Whatever might be said of Euripides’ tendency to disrupt convention and upset audiences, his work was neither marginal nor mediocre; it was, as Aristotle wrote, most tragic.

It is not Euripides who suffers from faults of organization, but his universe. While Sophokles wrote tragedies that unfolded smoothly into their moments of horror, Euripides’ tragedies resisted traditional order both within and without the text in a fashion that evoked “a universe coming apart at the seams” (Porter, xii).

Even among those who embrace Euripides’ excellence in tragedy and tragic impressions, only a few tragedies receive critical recognition of merit. While many scholars focus on the splendidly tragic and disturbing *Bakkhai* and *Medea*, such tragedies as *Alkestis* that adumbrate these later explosively transgressive dramas are seen as earlier—and sometimes lesser—attempts at tragedy. *Alkestis*, which won second place in the competition (second only to a tragedy of Sophokles) entertains criticism usually dedicated to the confusing complexity of its characters but finds its manifestations of transgression overlooked. *Alkestis* does not stand out as a departure from the usual work of this trickster tragedian, but rather is replete with the radical disjunction associated with Euripides evoking a world without

order or meaning, a world that struggles desperately to hold itself together as it comes apart.

This tragedy offers an illustration of transgression. The plot revolves around the violation of the limit between life and death that instigates the collapse—and subsequent resurrection—of all other boundaries. When there are no distinctions between life and death, social, gender and genre categories cease to maintain life's matrix. All definitions of fitting behavior, or what is appropriate (*prepei*) begin to waver as all that once fit—an important concept in Greek tragedy—is exceeded. *Alkestis* itself, like Euripides' universe, threatens to come apart. Peppered with dissonance, disparate elements come together and resist each other at the locus of collapsed boundaries. No structure holds it together, least of all the traditional tragic structure.

The play itself metamorphoses throughout the progress of the play, exceeding or falling short but never quite meeting the standards of tragedy. It loses all adherence to traditional form. The play, which debuted in 438 B.C., was presented in the slot usually slated for a satyr play. During the Greater Dionysia, a festival for all Greece during which many plays were shown—tragedies, comedies and satyr plays—and each genre had its own slated time of performance. As a practice, three tragedies were shown followed by a satyr play. Drinking and sexual innuendo comprised the events of a satyr play; quite possibly, as in a comedy, the players wore leather phalluses strapped to their belt. Because of its placement in the ancient play bill, critics have labeled this play “pro-satyrical.” While this title has its uses, one must not forget that it is a category created expressly for this play and no other. The label “pro-satyrical” refers to no genre apart from the complicated genre offered by this transgressive tragedy. Apparently, this play defies genre categorization just as the figures within the play, characters or ideas, defy categorization.

Alkestis opens as a traditional tragedy. Beginning *in media res* Apollo offers a speech that brings the audience up to the moment of this beginning. Alkestis has nobly offered to give her life so that her husband, who was slated by the fates to die, might live. The play opens in a liminal zone. At the moment of the speech, the house prepares for Alkestis' death and soon after, Death comes announcing his plan to take Alkestis. Apollo tells him that Herakles will thwart Death's intentions, and there will be a happy ending. Since this information belongs only to the god and the audience, mourning abounds for the characters on stage. The Chorus frets over the fate of the gallant Alkestis and begs the nurse to tell them of her doings. The nurse describes the utterances of Alkestis as she wanders through her home one last time. The entire speech seems composed of tear-jerking sentiments. This woman, who does so much more than any other *philoï* of this man, wanders through the home fearing her seemingly inevitable replacement. She speaks, according to the nurse, of missing her children, of missing her husband, and of missing her life above. Later, she gives another speech with many of the same sentiments. Her death on stage only heightens the melodrama. Although the mourning begins on stage—and is to continue throughout the play if Admetus' rash promise holds—Herakles' visit cuts it short. After a deceptive interaction in which Admetus convinces Herakles that no serious mourning takes place within the house, Herakles begins to enact a satyr play. Herakles sits at a table drinking excessively and imploring the young servant to join him. Herakles' tone seems both drunken and lecherous. This scene alters the timbre of the play; this guest has stumbled onto a tragedy but acts as if he is a player in a satyr play. But other elements of the play also depart from the tragic path. Admetus' argument with his aged father Pheres has both comic and tragic elements which enable this transformation.

Perhaps the audience's awareness of the play's happy resolution effected the way in which they interpreted all interactions in this drama. However, Herakles, as the primary agent of transformation, fulfills his duty by changing the ending into a comedy.

Although Euripides has written other tragedies with happy endings, I contend that a play that ends with a marriage or a union, that is, ends happily and seemingly resolves conflict, falls into the general category of a comedy. At the end, the order that had disappeared returns. Unlike *Oedipus Tyrannos* which smoothly and poignantly removes the boundaries that gave Oedipus meaning, Euripides' *Alkestis* opens with a tragedy, with a universe that has lost meaning and continues to lose meaning and attempts to restore the order by the end. Significantly, the order restored at the end lacks natural stability, since Euripides' universe has never had it. Whatever violations of natural laws that have occurred, the breach has been mended while the limits have been altered. Certainly Admetus and Alkestis will both die someday, both will likely encounter separation from each other, but this trauma has been put off until another day. The ending here is a happy one. Identities and lives may have come apart, but they have reassembled for a while longer. The play moves according to myth and adheres carefully to the story while violating the laws of traditional tragedy.

Not only is the order at the end seemingly fragile but it differs from the order of the beginning. This is the nature of transgression; it is not the simple violation of a limit; rather, it collapses boundaries and establishes new limits. Herakles, a savior figure within the play, functions as an embodiment of transgression. Herakles, a demi-god, like the other trickster demi-god, Dionysius, is a figure of liminality. He falls under all categories thereby disrupting their meaning; he plays with all categories and distinctions. At the same time he works to establish limits. By

blurring all distinctions; he somehow replaces them. Like his demi-divine relatives, Herakles questions and redraws the limits like transgression itself.

Alkestis centers on transgression and liminality in its plot, in its structure and in the figures it introduces. From the structure of the tragedy to the elements of its plot, all tropes collapse in one locus. Throughout the play, distinctions cease to exist; contradictions reign. The happy end completes the cycle of transgression when a differently defined order is restored. Euripides' order is not natural and static, rather it is susceptible to negotiation.

What I Talk About When I Talk About Transgression

When considering the notion of transgression, I consider not only its traditional definition of rule-breaking as either a violation of a law, command, or duty or the exceeding of bounds or limits, but I also consider the definitions offered by Michel Foucault and (Pseudo) Longinus. Transgression is not merely a violation that permanently confuses categories; it is not a mere breach of limits that destroys them; transgression blurs the distinctions in order to redraw them. Transgression proceeds from the initial breach to the moment at which everything is permitted and all definitions exist simultaneously and ends with lines redrawn. Transgression must reconstruct the boundaries it collapsed otherwise the limits have no meaning and transgression itself becomes obsolete. Transgression inevitably brings another, albeit different, limit into being.

Foucault writes in "Madness, the Absence of Work" "...we have known for a long time that humanity does not start out from freedom but from limitation and the line not to be crossed" (294). There is no universe that contains natural limits offering

humanity a world of freedom. According to Foucault, humanity constructs and reconstructs the limitations that bind it. Neither transgression nor limits could exist without their play. And as in an academic discipline, like definitions, limits need expansion and change, "the sudden irruptive inclusion in our language of the speech of the excluded" (Foucault, 294). The transgression of the inclusion lies not in the violation of codified and rigid definitions but in the simultaneous violation and elimination of the old limit; this becomes the act that establishes the new limit. Transgression lies in the play of the negotiation: violation, elimination and foundation. Transgression is dialogue; it is the play which makes a play.

Foucault notes that transgression is an entry into the unmediated, a state in which the sacred is revealed in its empty form. He refers to transgression as the death of God which, as he writes, "does not restore us to a limited and positivistic world, but to a world exposed by the experience of its limits, made and unmade by the excess which transgresses it" (Foucault, Preface). The mention of the death of God appears to invalidate the notion of an exteriority of being. Of course, the elimination of limits removes all meaning of "interiority" and "exteriority." Oppositional notions need the limits to exist as such. Instead of immutable and unchanging laws that grant eternal meaning to a moment, everything is cause for dispute and negotiation. The thing that exceeds the laws, however, also serves to remake it. While the transgression calls the distinctions into question, it also serves to remake the world that it shatters. In a more extended passage Foucault explains transgression:

Transgression is an action which involves the limit, that narrow zone of a line where it displays the flash of its passage, but perhaps also its entire trajectory and even its origin; it is likely that transgression has its entire space in the line that it crosses. The play of limits and trans-

gression seems to be regulated by a simple obstinacy: *transgression incessantly crosses and recrosses a line which closes up behind it in a wave of extremely short duration, and thus it is made to return once more right to the horizon of the uncrossable.* But this relationship is considerably more complex: These elements are situated in an uncertain context, in certainties which are immediately upset so that thought is ineffectual as soon as it attempts to seize them. (Preface, 34. Emphasis added.)

Transgression not only plays with the limit but it offers the “flash of passage,” a moment in which discards limits and reveals the unmediated sacred. However, almost immediately, limits return although “right to the horizon,” that is, moved and changed. In the transgressive world of no shadows, no limits exist, all is available. At the same time, the world must be recomposed in this instant. Transgression is not merely violation but exposure of the unmediated and the return to new limits. Foucault describes transgression as a spiral, thus indicating the continuous engagement of the action (Preface, 35). No mere breach, transgression allows a negotiation and play that allows the return of the necessary limits after their eradication. The language of light used by Foucault serves to emphasize the illuminating aspects of transgression in which distinctions are played as false. At the same time, the land of shadows must return, even if the world has changed.

Longinus, a much earlier philosopher and writer, also discusses this theme in his discussion of the sublime.¹ In his tract, *Peri Hupsous*,² Longinus discusses what makes great writing. Great writing effects what could be deemed “sublime.” In the

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1. While he was not a contemporary of Euripides, it is important to realize that this issue of transgression or unmediated existence had its existence earlier than Foucault and could very well trace its existence to companions of Euripides.
 2. Directly translated it means “On Heights” although the word itself implies not so much a physical dimension but an extremity of being; the translation of preference is “On the Sublime.”

first chapter he describes the properties of great writing “Great writing does not persuade; it takes the reader out of himself...greatness appears suddenly; like a thunderbolt it carries before it and reveals the writer’s full power in a flash.” The propriety of interaction is transgressed. Great writing (the sublime), takes its reader out of himself; that is, it disrupts the initial boundaries and forces the reader’s loss of distinction between interiority and exteriority. The thunderbolt and flash also suggest Foucault’s world without shadows and his “flash of its passage,” elements of his transgression. Longinus’ sublime points to a creation of continuity in which distinctions are blurred and connections are formed. What had been defined as different and separate ceases to appear that way. Longinus writes that great writing can cause a reader to feel as if he produces what he reads (Longinus, Ch. 7). The continuity collapses the boundaries between speakers and listeners or readers, feeling and words, the specific and the general, and “between a natural moment and the technique of its transmission” (Kahan, lecture).³ The sublime eradicates differentiation; it produces the illusion of immediacy. As transgression does so, it takes us to the unmediated world of the sacred. The sublime, like transgression, for a moment can unite what was once arbitrarily separated. In one description of Sappho’s great writing—and the sublimity it instigates—Longinus writes:

Do you not marvel how she seeks to make her mind, body, ears, tongue, eyes, and complexion, as if they were scattered elements strange to her, join together in the same moment of experience? In contradictory phrases she describes herself as hot and cold at once, rational and irrational, at the same time terrified and almost dead, in order to appear afflicted not by one passion but by a swarm of passions. (18)

3. From an unpublished lecture on Longinus given at Yale, 1993.

Disparate forces come together in flash; a multiplicity resides in one point. This, too, is part of what composes transgression and the sublime. The moment itself is a contradiction where no contradictions may exist. The sublime produces a moment of continuity as if such continuity were natural.

This moment, however, is temporary. Limits eventually return. Longinus discusses the importance of allegory as a return to recognizing difference while intimating immediacy. Allegory returns one from improper and unfitting beliefs that do not differentiate between gods and men and their respective creations. Limits are enforced in spite of the sublimity of a moment. Longinus quotes from the beginning of the Torah, and comments:

In this manner also the lawgiver of the Jews, no ordinary man, since he recognized and expressed divine power according to its worth, expressed that power clearly when he wrote at the beginning of his Laws: 'And God said.' What? 'Let there be light, and there was light; let there be land, and there was land.'

This passage, unlike the work of Sappho, reveals mediation and careful categorization. The words of the lawgiver, of Longinus and of God are clearly defined. Significantly, Longinus separates the lawgivers' "And God said," with his own "what?" from God's mediated statement "Let there be light and there was light." While the word ("let there be light") and the action ("and there was light") come together in the latter part of the sentence, the sublimity of the act is circumvented by the lawgiver's own mediation ("And God said") which is in turn compounded by Longinus' own mediation ("what?"). This careful categorization and mediation ensure the difference between God and these writers; the hint of sublimity in God's statement reminds one of the transgression possible within the structure.

The sublime effects moments of seemingly pure continuity but such moments cannot last. The erection of boundaries and the return of mediation brings an end to this liminal period of sublimity. Yet the suggestion of the absolute continuity haunts the new construction; it hints at a world that is not static but that undergoes constant redefinition.

Both Foucault's transgression and Longinus' sublime provide a useful framework for reading the *Alkestis*. The play is a mass of continuous contradictions and violations that come together in a moment that exceeds its traditional limits. This play, transforming itself throughout its own process, contains a series of violations against so-called natural laws that establish continuities where none existed. As one limit comes into question all order blurs; the matrix lacks distinction and yet wins all illumination as everything is permitted. This play, like transgression and the sublime, toys with limits erasing yet reconstructing them. Yet this event cannot restore the previous structure; the very undoing of the limits has made this impossible.

The analysis begins with an examination of death's role in the tragedy as the limit whose violation frames the action. As we become aware of the intensity of the violation, we witness the erosion of Athenian social mores and practices. The gendered identities of Alkestis and Admetus unravel and merge, allowing Alkestis' masculinization combined with Admetus' gradual feminization. Within this muddle other distinctions and rules of behavior lose their force and meaning. Yet rather than merely an exchange of positionalities, which would affirm the existence of a limit, they merge at the same time that they reverse. In the midst of this liminality, Herakles, a figure of inherent and internal oppositions, enters to restore the order. Carefully re-establishing appropriate yet redefined distinctions by means of his own violations, Herakles func-

tions in a manner similar to transgression, just as this play, replete with dissonance, redefines itself in its progress.

The Limit

Who knows if life is really death while death is viewed as life down below?

—Euripides' *Polidius* (Gregory, 20)⁴

The point of death is death, and the dead are lost and gone.

—Admetus (*Alkestis*, 527)

Death is an obligation which we all must pay.

There is not one man living who can truly say
if he will be alive or dead on the next day.

Fortune is dark; she moves, but we cannot see the way
nor can we pin her down by science and study her.

—Herakles (*Alkestis*, 782-786)

The boundary between life and death and its violation plays a central role in the tragedy. The story itself is about a woman who dies in the place of her husband and is restored to life by Herakles. What occurs within this play happens within the frame of death's limits. From Apollo's opening speech to the Chorus' ode to Necessity (*Ananke*) this tragedy establishes death as a necessary, immutable and tangible limit, one that has been transgressed at the onset and whose transgression is

4. At this time I would like to acknowledge the similarity of Ms. Gregory's ideas about death as a limit that frames the categories of existence and my own, especially as we relate these ideas to the *Alkestis*. Quite possibly this similarity of thought may be attributed to these new developments in classical scholarship. For some time the canon of classical criticism appeared ossified and untouched by contemporary critical frameworks; however, classical scholars have recently decided to expand this critical canon. I very much appreciate the work of Ms. Gregory especially as she interprets Euripides' intentions in his work.

essentially responsible for the dissipation of other limits throughout the play. Indeed, death's violation not only frames the events of the tragedy but it also offers a space of liminality for the duration of the play. Death evaded cannot function as life since the violation severed their distinction. Transgression establishes liminality during which prior meanings evaporate and distinctions disappear. Liminality, effected by transgression, is the land of no shadows. Only the end, the renewed demarcation, reveals this period as one that negotiates and redefines the earlier limits and their meanings.

In Apollo's opening speech he begins with the claim "Zeus was the cause." Ultimately, he asks that the audience see how Zeus' actions have brought the events we are about to see to fruition: "Zeus killed my son Asclepius / and drove the bolt of hot lightning through his chest." Asclepius' death became cause for Apollo's retaliatory murder of Cyclopes, a son of Zeus, thus compelling his punishment of servitude in the house of Admetus. A.M. Dale cites Pindar as he asserts that "Asclepius' offense was to have raised the dead to life" (Dale, 51).⁵ Zeus, a champion of Necessity (964ff.), unsettled by Asclepius' constant violation of this limit, killed him in order to end his acts of transgression. This theme emerges later in the play when the

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5. It is also interesting to note that Euripides' audience may have been extremely sensitive to mentions of Asclepius. E.R. Dodds believes that during the late 5th century BC and the 4th century the popular religion of Athens began to degenerate. One of the "symptoms" of this disintegration was "the increased demand for magical healing, particularly through the cult of Asclepius" (Mikalson, 111). Possibly the very name of Asclepius signified a breakdown of old standards and practices for the Athenians. Also notable is that certain mythical accounts portray Asclepius as a figure with the "unusual birth". According to G.S. Kirk, Apollo aided in the birth of Asclepius, removing him from his mother's body. Perhaps such a birth serves as a signifier of a transgressive figure.

Chorus remarks that there was only one who may have saved Alkestis from her death:

There was only one. If the eyes
of Phoebus' son were opened
still, if he could have come
and left the dark chambers,
the gates of Hades.
He upraised those who were stricken
down, until (*prin*) from the hand of God
the flown bolt of thunder hit him.
Where is there any hope for me any longer?

Not only does this passage remind the audience of Asclepius' function within the tragedy but it recalls his transgression. The Chorus also confirms Pindar's assertion that Asclepius offended by transgressing this limit. The Chorus uses the word *prin* as "until." For Smyth, this word carries the implication of intention. That is, Zeus kills Asclepius in order that he not upraise the stricken (2418a). So he sets the stage: Zeus initiated the events about to transpire through his murder of Asclepius who brought the dead to life. Zeus and Apollo engage in a battle over the immutability of the limit between life and death. The gift Apollo proffers does not improve his kind host's life, as we shall see, instead it functions as a continuation of his battle with Zeus. Apollo "cheats the Fates" (10) and overthrows them by what Death deems a "shabby wrestler's trick" (34).

In the Chorus' final ode to Necessity, we find Zeus affiliated with this power and this power joined to the necessity of death. The Chorus tells the audience that they have found "nothing so strong as Compulsion [Necessity, *Anankas*]" (964) nor have they found "any means to combat her" since she exists as an immutable force. They refer to death's "inescapable [*aphuktoisi*] grip" on Alkestis indicating a power that resists any violation.

They claim “She alone is a goddess / without altar or image to pray” (971-2). Within Greek tragedy the goddess without a cult traditionally signifies death, which further confirms the possibility that the Chorus yokes Necessity with death. Not in “Thracian books set down in verse by the school of Orpheus,” nor “in all the remedies Phoebus has given the heirs of Asclepius,” rests a cure for this necessity. Within this passage the Chorus confirms the positions of Apollo and Asclepius as transgressors of this ultimate limit. The passage clarifies and articulates Apollo’s struggle with the limit, establishing him as a god affiliated with transgression.⁶ The mention of Asclepius once again assures the audience’s understanding of the violation of death as the transgression which frames and directs this play.

Of Zeus’ need for and adherence to the limit the Chorus claims “All Zeus ordains / only with you is accomplished” (977-8). By articulating Zeus’ affiliation with the ultimate necessity of death the Chorus provides further reason for his murder of Asclepius. As king of the gods he must also ensure and secure the limits and boundaries. Notably, one of the greatest distinctions between gods and humans is that of mortality. Death provides the differentiation for men and gods. This distinction emerges in language as well. Justina Gregory writes “[o]n the level of etymology [mortality] was what differentiated human beings from gods: mortals (*thnetoi*, *brotoi*) were subject to extinction, while the gods (*athanatoi*, *ambrotoi*) could never die” (21). Significantly, gods and mortals seem to find the distinctions of their identities in the placement of their limits. Notably, gods seem to find their identity within the

6. I find this particular partnership quite curious; it has not been my experience to read Apollo as even remotely affiliated with transgression considering his position in criticism as an opposition to Dionysius. However, within this text this role suits Apollo. Perhaps we might attribute this perverse affiliation to Euripides’ desire to flood his own text with transgression.

denial of human limits. Asclepius' transgression of this ultimate limit upsets the categories of god and human by erasing their distinctions. The upset of boundaries instigated by this son of Apollo also provides a greater comprehension of Apollo's punishment. Zeus punished Apollo for the death of his son, Cyclopes, by forcing him into servitude to Admetus, a mortal. In the opening speech Apollo refers to his subjection to Admetus "although being a god" (2) thus acknowledging the impropriety of such an arrangement. Apollo, the champion of transgression, is forced into a transgressive and demeaning situation by Zeus, the champion of *Ananke* and the ultimate limit.

Although the personification of death appears within the play, the tangibility of Death's limit is signified in the use of spatial and temporal semantics. Throughout the play we find descriptions of death that enable an almost physical image of its presence as limit. Most notable is the elementary differentiation between the world above ground as that of the living and the world below as that of the dead. Simplistic as this differentiation seems, it also indicates the presence of death as a location whose perimeter serves as limit both for itself as well as for life. References to death as a locus appear throughout the play. Death says of Alkestis "And I shall take her down where the dead are" (47). Apollo returns with his bitterness at her voyage (*nauklerian*) which Lattimore significantly translates as "crossing". In one of Alkestis' death speeches she claims to see Charon, the ferryman of the dead, eager to take her (252ff). Indeed, the presence of Charon, the ferryman of the Styx, only perpetuates this image of death as limitation. In the *Iliad*, Achilles refers to death as the "barrier of teeth" (*herkos odonton*; 9.409) as he discusses the futility of dying for whatever noble purposes since one can never return. In the Chorus' final ode

to Necessity, they refer to the "sheer barrier of your will" (980). The word they use, *apotomon*, suggests a cliff. A.M. Dale suggests that "the picture is rather of a steep cliff wall against which man dashes his head in vain" (122). Frequently throughout the tragedy characters refer to death as a location with a manifest boundary, one whose physical transgression appears impossible; one whose transgression would call the delineations of location into question. When the barrier cannot function, the place of death spills into life. The irruptive voice of transgression banishes distinctions and settles in liminality.

Not only is death a physical and external boundary, but it also functions as a temporal landmark. Time undergoes a physical description in which death rests as a place, a location for various characters. In his opening speech Apollo describes Alkestis as "...at the breaking point of life, because destiny marks / this for her day of death and taking leave of life" (20). Her physical crossing of the boundary demands a precise time as if it serves in conjunction as a temporal barrier. Later, when Apollo sees Death approach he comments: "He has come on time. He has been watching for this day on which her death falls due" (26-7). The Nurse replies "This is the day of destiny. It is too strong." in answer to the Chorus' question "There is no hope left she will live?" (146). Apollo's debate with Death centers on whether he can postpone death, not whether he can prevent it altogether, thereby indicating that evading the fitting (predetermined and appropriate) moment is the transgressive component. Since Admetus has evaded his appropriate moment, the events that transpire unfold in the duration of transgression. Each claim establishes death as closely linked to destiny and dependent on the appropriate moment of arrival. The propriety of the moment of death functions as a limit just as its apparent certainty of location does.

One might read the dialogue between Death and Apollo as one between transgression and the limit. As a perverse collaborator with transgression, Apollo attempts to engage Death, the personification of the limit, in a debate. While Apollo has already appeared as a transgressor through his support and defense of his son, Asclepius, Apollo's own excess and departure from propriety also appear in the debate. Death notes Apollo's role in the comment "It is your custom to help this house more than you ought [*ekdikos*]." His use of the word *ekdikos* for "more than one ought" designates Apollo's actions as outside the realm of just or fitting behavior. Another indicator of Apollo's position outside the limits of propriety emerges in Death's description of Apollo's tricking or cheating the Fates as overthrowing them "by a shabby wrestler's trick [*sphelanti techne*]" (34). This accusation suggests a forceful destabilization of the limit since the word *sphelanti* suggests disrupting something from its position by means of deception. Death also asks Apollo "You mean to take her body, too, away from me?" (44), implying a physical act of violation, a corporeal transgression. Apollo's presence threatens the mandatory and permanent nature of death. Images of palpable transgression emerge in the dialogue of Apollo and Death providing Apollo with his affiliation with transgression.

Undaunted by Death's accusations Apollo directs the discussion to a plea for Alkestis' life. However, he does not wish to eliminate the limit itself so much as he wishes to modify its position. Apollo tells Death that he wishes only to "put their death off" since "they must die in the end" (50). Apollo's attempt at negotiation suggests the second phase of transgression that redefines then resurrects the limits to the new horizon of the uncrossable. Apollo affirms Death as a necessity but he suggests negotiability in the place of immutability. Apollo, like transgression, works to move the limit, not remove it; he pro-

poses postponement, not eradication. Regardless of Death's steadfast adherence to limitations and timeliness, Apollo persists in his attempt to evade Death's "irrefutable" necessity. "If she dies old, she will have a lavish burial," Apollo informs Death. When Death replies "What you propose, Phoebus, is to favor the rich." Apollo seizes the opportunity to comment "What is this? Have you unrecognized talents for debate?" (56-58) Once Apollo playfully calls Death *sophos*, a sophist, he suggests that Death's limit is not a natural necessity, but one constructed and thus mutable. However, Apollo cannot sway Death from his necessary constant position so he tells him that his inevitability is not so: Alkestis will escape Death with Herakles as her savior. Herakles will come, Apollo tells Death, and "he shall take the woman away from you by force." This claim recalls Death's initial accusation of Apollo's overthrowing the Fates, that is, disrupting the limits (34). The limit is subject to further disruption and the violence of this transgression will be greater than that intimated by Death. Herakles' *bia* will function as a more forceful violation than Apollo's trick. What was once abstract is now manifest and becomes a potent image of violation. Apollo's tricks and Herakles' force will disrupt the constructed limits to reveal an instant of seemingly organic continuity; because the instant cannot hold, the renegotiation of the constructed boundary ensues. Transgression reveals the limit as impure, not natural, and thus subject to debate.⁷

The language of the characters constructs death as a manifest limit, one whose transgression is a physical act. Returning from the crossing of death is a transgression;

7. Although Foucault claims that transgression itself is not violent, I find that transgression carries connotations of extreme violence. Yet the presence of violence does not contradict the play of transgression that eliminates and negotiates limits.

avoiding death by proxy is a transgression; and its postponement is a transgression that re-establishes the limit. The act rebuilds and reconstructs the limit as different from its previous incarnation. Euripides establishes death as the primary limit of this tragedy, from the opening in which Apollo suggests that this event is only one in a long line of circumstances that comprise his struggle with Zeus, defender of the limit to the Chorus' ode to Necessity to Alkestis' death and return. The necessity of death's unchanging limit is contested throughout the drama. The contestation and negotiation of the limit combined with the violation of death's necessity provides the framework of transgression that circumscribes the play. But then, as in Foucault's transgression or Longinus' sublime, this event, this time, is marked by its immediate ("unmediated") state of continuities and loss of distinction. This thunderbolt, or land without shadows, is not only marked by the loss of the primary distinctions of life and death, but life itself, during this time, loses the categories that compose its structure. During this time of transgression, the matrix of the world falls apart; no distinctions exist. Differentiation is made difficult as categories blur and tropes collapse; the transgression brings a period of liminality in which meaning has no meaning.

Do You Call Him a Man at All? **Gender Confusion and Social Collapse** **in the Liminal Zone**

As we have seen, transgression not only opens, but also frames the drama. Within this liminal zone roles and tropes overlap as continuity overwhelms distinction. When the limit of death is disrupted, not only the differentiation between men and

gods falls into dispute but the other categories of the living cease to carry the same relevance. One of the most distinctive dissipations of the play occurs in the breakdown of gendered identities. Once Alkestis has made her decision to die in the stead of her husband, a violation of death's law, she loses the traditionally and socially defined feminine attributes and gains a more masculinized identity. Conversely, Admetus becomes feminized. This event, while perhaps only a playful reversal to emphasize Admetus' weakness and Alkestis' strength,⁸ may also point to the weakening of the boundaries that construct the foundation of daily existence. That is, once a man reflects the feminine and a woman reflects the masculine the notion of a natural attribution of qualities according to biological sex loses its validity. Within the frame of gender role reversal and disruption, other social mediations disappear and immediate contact between previously disparate forces is secured.

Before a discussion of the transgression and excess of gender roles may occur, an examination and explanation of the roles as they functioned in Fifth Century Athens is needed. The most common framework for understanding Athenian social life is one that links men to the *polis*, the civic, and the outside, and women to the *oikos* (the household) and the personal life of the inside. However, one must recognize that such categorization provides a useful model for understanding more than it serves as an absolute definition of a social structure. Both men and women had important roles in the *polis* and the *oikos* and neither was completely confined to or completely excluded from one realm. Men were members of the *oikos* just as women could par-

8. While this may go without saying, such an attribution of characteristics to gender is not a necessary one, but a very possible one in a world that considers power concurrent with masculinity. It is also necessary to point out that these binary oppositional structures are useful models for analysis; they are not inevitable or natural.

ticipate in the *polis*. Each one had specific roles and responsibilities within each realm. Helene Foley offers a useful description of this structure:

...both men and women share an interest in the *oikos* and in the values which help it to survive. But each performs for the *oikos* a different function, each recognizing different virtues, and acts in separate spaces, one inside, one outside. Each sex also shares an interest in the *polis*, and performs different public functions which help to perpetuate the state, the male political and military functions, which exclude women, the female religious functions. In each sphere the male holds legal authority over the female. (Foley, 154)

Unlike the tragic *oikos* whose absentee father allowed each mother to become a Klytemnestra or a Medea, the traditional *oikos* had a role for men. The man controlled the *oikos* and acted as its public representative. Not solely male or female, “the household is the context in which male and female individuals operate as a single social entity” (Foxhall, 23). This claim does not indicate the absence of gender specific roles within the household, merely that the *oikos* did not belong to women alone. The *oikos*, like the community it reflected, tended towards separation and hierarchy. The role of the man was that of lord or *kurios*. He was also the bridge between the *oikos* and the *polis*. “In any case, as household head he was the intermediary between the private world in which his wife lived and the public world” (Foxhall, 35).

As for the wife’s role, Demosthenes called her “the trusty guardian of things inside” (Demosthenes, 57.122).⁹ However, her power was more symbolic than practically accessible. D.M. MacDowell claims that the woman’s partnership in the *oikos* had

9. I credit Lin Foxhall for making this reference available.

more value “rhetorically” than legally (18). One legal “right” a woman could claim was over her dowry. That is, she could legally retrieve her dowry should she choose to leave her husband, an event which did occur on occasion in ancient Athens.

As the man was not completely barred from the world of the *oikos* neither was the woman prohibited from entering the realm of the *polis*. Her participation, however, was limited to religious rites and festivals. Froma Zeitlin sees religious participation as an opportunity for escape from the limited world of the household:

First, from the point of view of social history, women’s connections with religion and with cult performance were of great significance to their own lives, they provided, in fact, probably the only legitimate reason for leaving the house....(129)

While some critics feel that cults were something uncontrollable and distinctly opposed to the culture of the *polis*, one must remember that these many festivals were functions for the *polis*. It is in the participation of the religious rites that a woman participated in the *polis*; she was not confined entirely and utterly to the *oikos*.

However, recognition of the overlapping of the realms of *oikos* and *polis* does not indicate equal roles of men and women. When Eva Keuls describes fifth century Athens as “phallogocentric” she refers to a social system in which the phallus represents power thus designating power exclusively as male (Keuls). Whatever glory a woman could achieve did not achieve the status or rank of male glory. Nicole Loraux explains this situation : “The idea is not completely strange to them, but this glory which is always subordinated to a career as a ‘good wife’, often merges into feminine worth (*arete*)...Female worth is never confused with real worth which belongs to men” (Loraux, 27). Notably, in his famed funeral oration, Pericles, while encourag-

ing men to act courageously for the sake of other members of the *polis* asserts that respectable women should not have any public reputation, good or bad (Thucydides, 2.46). Not only does this statement confirm a woman's minimal role in the *polis* but it also indicates that women should take no part in the system of public virtue that operated in Athens. Women could excel in caring for their families, their *philia*, but no other recognition of virtue was permissible. The epigraphs that do exist refer to women's excellence in carding, sewing, weaving, and caring for the family. They seem to ascribe the title of excellence grudgingly, noting the wife or woman to be as good as the limit of women's excellence allowed (Lefkowitz and Fant).¹⁰ Notably, in one story of one woman's bravery, Herodotus' account of Artemisia, the sea captain, her excellence and success in a battle at sea prompted a witness to remark, "My men have turned into women and my women into men" (Lefkowitz and Fant, 22).

One way a woman could operate in the public and masculine value system was as a negative example of acceptable behavior. She could operate as a foil to prove a man's *arete* thus earning him his *kleos* (glory, fame). A.N. Micheleni notes that "...the condemnation of women and female behavior played an important role in Greek society enhancing male solidarity and helping to enforce the value system centering on *arete*" (294).

These particular social categorizations collapse with Alkestis' untimely death, the primary breach of the drama. The distinctions between the oppositions of male and female, *polis* and *oikos*—civic and personal—blur. Within the framework of gender confusion, the characterizations of death converge and convention falls into disarray.

10. Significantly, when a woman won recognition in athletics, epigraphs referred to the male sponsors and relatives of the victors. Solitary recognition in this forum did not exist.

The audience first meets Alkestis in a liminal state indicating the status of transgression in progress. The Chorus, fretting in front of the house, asks after her state and receives the answer "I could tell you that she is still alive or that she is dead." At this point Alkestis lacks a solid category for existence. This transgression of death has disrupted the understanding of life and death as separate and distinct positions. Continuity presides over the events. Later, Admetus continues to obfuscate the categories of existence under the questioning of Herakles. He hedges, refusing to admit she has died. Significantly, as he maintains a liminal space for Alkestis' state of existence in this conversation, he also disrupts her social categorization. When Herakles asks who has died, Admetus tells him that the victim was not a blood relative, not even a family member but someone who came to live in his home. In this passage he chooses an alternate reading of the marital situation, choosing to interpret this figure championing his *oikos* as outside the *oikos* with no distinct relationship to the family within. If the limit of death is subject to debate and negotiation, so too are the limits and structures that compose a life. Justina Gregory agrees, noting that Admetus' evasive answers regarding her life and death perpetuate the nebulous and negotiable position of the living and the dead. Distinctions have been banished from this world.

As the frame of existence breaks apart, the categories of everyday life continue to dissipate. Alkestis steps out of her designated role of woman by exceeding the limits of woman's virtue. She adheres to the designation of "trustworthy guardian of things within" as she sacrifices herself for the sake of her husband. In tragedy sacrifice for the sake of one's spouse is a traditionally feminine act (Loraux, 23). However, Alkestis' sacrifice transcends its value to the *oikos* as it moves into the public sphere of

the *polis* where she wins public recognition and glory (*kleos*). Tending to the wellbeing of her husband she sacrifices herself, thus becoming not only the best of all women, but also a figure of public recognition. While many a female literary figure has won attention and glory for her actions, such as Penelope for her faithfulness to the roving Odysseus, Alkestis' act does not affirm or reify the structure she saves. Penelope's act perpetuates the model of the good wife within the structure of marriage and the *oikos*; conversely, Alkestis' act threatens to destroy the *oikos*. Alkestis' devotion has the inverse effect of destroying what she proposes to save; her act alters both Admetus' and her own positions within marriage, masculinizing herself while feminizing her husband according to cultural categories.

Alkestis' noble act wins her much public recognition—in direct contradiction to the advice of Pericles. J.R. Wilson acknowledges the extremity of her act and the likely fame that follows, “of course Alkestis, by sacrificing so much wins an even greater measure of fame...” (Wilson, 5). The Chorus monitors her actions from the onset; stationed outside the house they eagerly ask about her condition and its progression. Significantly, citizens of Thessaly compose the Chorus indicating their role as representatives of the *polis*. Actions that take place before them, occur before the *polis*. Their sentiment becomes public sentiment. Frequently they acknowledge Alkestis' greatness:

Let her be sure, at least that as she dies, there dies
the noblest (*euklees*) woman underneath the sun by far. (150)

To which the Nurse replies:

Noblest? Of course the noblest, who will argue that?
What shall the wife be who surpasses her? And how
could any woman show that she loves her husband more...

But all the city knows that well. You shall be told
now how she acted in the house...

Alkestis' actions within the house become public knowledge. The events of the *oikos* spill into the *polis*. Alkestis' overwhelming sacrifice for her *philia*, a female excellence, merges with the traditionally masculine recognition. The *kleos* that she will win, or has already won, is inextricably related to attention within the public realm. Gregory Nagy points out the interesting etymology of *kleos* as likely derived from *kluo*, "to hear," thus relating this sort of fame to a public domain (Nagy, 16). The Chorus sings:

For you, O only you, dearest among women
dared to exchange your very own soul
in the place of your husband (saving him) from Hades. (460-3)

Most interesting is the use of the word "exchange" (*ameipsai*) which reminds the audience that Alkestis and Admetus have stepped out of their designated roles in life and death, and perhaps also in the structure of marriage. The gain of *kleos* and recognition becomes the first of the masculine attributes for Alkestis. Although Admetus' death would not have been deemed heroic, his death would have been met with eulogies and public accounts of his civic services. His masculine status affords him the possibility of reputation and recognition.

The fact of her *kleos* does not escape Alkestis' notice either. She is quite aware of the value of her choice. Her descriptions of her act belie this attitude. When she speaks of Admetus' parents refusing to die for him, she remarks that having reached a good time to die in their lives they could have died honorably (*eukleos*) (292). Instead, this *kleos* will belong to her. Her concern for *kleos* is also revealed in her final speech: "And you my

husband, / can boast the bride you took made you the bravest wife, / and you, children, can say, too, that your mother was brave" (320-3). The concern for her *philia* that motivated her sacrifice metamorphoses into a quest for *kleos*. Well aware of the nobility of her sacrifice, she wishes that individual act to stay on the lips of those around her.

While Alkestis' act is one of wifely virtue, sacrificing herself for the sake of her husband, her act is of disputable value for her family. She abandons her role in the *oikos* simultaneously upsetting Admetus' previously constructed role. Alkestis' decision allows her to desert her family and abdicate her role as caretaker of things inside. She makes the final request that Admetus never remarry, which will leave the children motherless (304-5, 371-73). Admetus will be the children's mother in the place of Alkestis (377). Her son's reaction to her death, while appropriately grieving his loss, acknowledges that his family has come apart:

She was cruel and went away
and left me to live all alone...

...

Father, I am too small to be left alone
by the mother I loved so much...

...

Oh father,
your marriage was empty, empty, she did not live
to grow old with you.
She died too soon. Mother, with you gone away,
the whole house is ruined. (396-7, 406ff)

This passage calls into question the efficacy of Alkestis' act in preserving the household, an essential requirement for female virtue. While many a male hero has abandoned his family and obligations of the *oikos* in the quest for his *kleos*, such as Hektor of the Iliad, such a requirement does not belong to the catego-

ry of wifely virtues. When the young son cries about the emptiness of the marriage, he intimates the uselessness of the prior structure that could not hold together. Not only has Alkestis died, leaving Admetus without a wife, but the positions and roles of the marriage did not hold. The breach of her exit leaves the structure of marriage in dispute; her exit destroys the *oikos*, structurally as well as with her absence.

The quality of Admetus' rescued life also comes into question. Her sacrifice seems to have harmed him more than saved him. He announces to Alkestis that not only will he never remarry but he will spend his life mourning her loss. "I shall go into mourning for you, not for just / a year, but all my life while it lasts, my dear" (335-6). His life, spent entirely in mourning, ceases to function as something separate and distinct from death. Admetus tells her "But I am lost, dear, if you leave me." He cries "Oh, I am lost!" Later, when Herakles confronts him about the death of his wife, he avers "her death destroyed me, even more than I can say." The breach of death incurred also provides Admetus with a liminal zone in which life and death are not clearly delineated. Alkestis may have saved his life, but his life is still destroyed. In reply to Herakles' palliative consolation that time will soften his pain, Admetus says "You can say time will soften it, if time means death" (1086). He asks the Chorus "Why did you stop me from throwing myself / in the hollow cut of the grave, there to lie / dead beside her..." (896-898). The life that Alkestis saved is now no longer distinguishable from the death that faced him earlier. Admetus too becomes the victim of the transgression that eliminates boundaries and distinctions. Admetus perpetuates the erasure of differentiation when he institutes a public and perpetual mourning for his wife (426ff). Not only does this act take Alkestis into the public realm but it distorts such other boundaries as life and

death, religious and laic. The act lacks appropriate distinctions, and considering its breach of social protocol the act lacks all propriety. Justina Gregory comments:

By prolonging his mourning Admetus breaks down the distinction between the living and the dead, between city and cemetery, which funerary rites are normally designed to reinforce. (35)

Admetus' decision reflects his loss of boundaries and his subsequent loss of place within the now defunct structure. All that Alkestis does which first appears as the noble sacrifice for the sake of her *philia* becomes an act that wins her *kleos* as it undoes the family and allows the family to continue the undoing of social categorizations.

Ironically, while Alkestis' act of sacrifice effects this death-in-life situation for Admetus, the very same sacrifice allows her immortality in her *kleos*. As I discussed earlier, *kleos* is the glory concurrent with public recognition. Such public recognition can win an individual everlasting existence in the fame. Gregory Nagy discusses the passage in the Iliad during which Achilles wonders whether he should return to battle in Troy (175-6).¹¹ He knows that should he live a long life he will never win *kleos* but that should he die in battle he will win *kleos* that is unfailing. Fame becomes synonymous with eternity and immortality (Nagy, 175-6) The Chorus confirms Alkestis' eternal fame in death when they point out to Admetus that "The monument of your wife must not be counted among the graves / of the dead, but it must be given its honors / as gods are..." (995-6). This claim points to the disruption of two boundaries, that of life and death, and that of public and private or city and home. First, Alkestis' voluntary death will bring her eternal life in praise and

11. Justina Gregory also refers to these passages in Nagy's book on heroism in Ancient Greece.

reputation—while Admetus' life becomes a death on earth. Second, honors equal to a god's were a distinction awarded to those who died in civic service (Mikalson, 94-5). The Chorus' description of Alkestis' monument then indicates their perception of her act as one of outstanding civic duty through their designation of high honors.

The play of gender roles and identity continues in the literary references of the drama. At different points both Alkestis and Admetus repeat episodes from the *Iliad* and Sophokles' *Ajax*, foregrounding their transgressive force with the inversion of the roles. The virility of Alkestis' act becomes apparent at the same time that her death transcends the various death genres. The scenes from *Iliad* VI, the farewell scene of Hektor and Andromache, and from Sophokles' *Ajax*, in which Tekmessa begs Ajax to reconsider his decision to take his own death, emerge in Alkestis, only Euripides transposes the roles; that is, Alkestis takes the role of the male hero while Admetus takes the role of the grieving spouse. That Alkestis becomes an allusional point of reference for these two heroes who experienced very different deaths, civic sacrifice and suicide, emphasizes the convergence of death genres in the single locus of this heroine. The inversion, playing upon the disintegrating gender division during the play, finds further collapse and liminality in other tropes.

As Ajax bemoans his ostensibly ignoble life and frets over the opinions of his father (463ff.),¹² Tekmessa implores him not to forsake his son and leave him *orphanistes* (512). W.B. Stanford comments that a reference to orphans carries an added poignancy since "at the city Dionysia a parade of the orphan children of

12. Ajax's concern for his father's opinion stands in stark contrast to Admetus' wish that his father die for him followed by the harsh rebukes directed at him. Certainly such an irony would not have escaped the audience's notice, especially not when Admetus later treats his father so harshly as to have likely horrified the audience.

men killed in battle for the state preceded the dramatic competition..." (124). This comment also parallels the farewell of Hektor and Andromache during which she begs him to follow her strategy and fight carefully lest she be taken away as a slave and her son is left an orphan (*orphanikon*) (6.432). Such scenes play upon the personal loss of families losing the *kurios* of the house to the glory of civic sacrifice. Thus such farewell scenes become a trope for the death by *kleos* and its occasional opposition to the *oikos*. The male citizens are to realize that through either suicide or self-sacrifice a duty must be followed despite the repercussions suffered by the *oikos*, or by those within, whom the wives must champion. Significantly then, as Alkestis prepares to die, her foreknowledge of death indicating sacrifice or suicide, Admetus pleads "do not be so harsh as to leave me, leave your children forlorn [*orphanies*]" (276). Here we also see Admetus take the role of guardian of things within just as Tekmessa and Andromache before him.

As Alkestis reminds the audience of the great heroes Ajax and Hektor, her death recalls their own. Her sacrifice will be for the sake of others, it is a civic death,¹³ thus following the code that a hero be of help to those near (*philia*). Although Alkestis seems to make her sacrifice for her family, their subsequent claims of destruction contest that belief. Instead, Alkestis' death hovers in the realm of the public and civic, actions taken for *kleos*; her death and positionality is more masculine than feminine. After the initial transgression, liminality ensues and thus Alkestis' feminine concerns lead her to a masculine death and glory at the same time that we will later see Admetus' over-concern for things within restore his position of masculinity at the end. Both Hektor and Ajax defend their decisions describing the glory won or the salvation from an ignoble life. Hektor imagines a plaque

13. Refer to the earlier discussion regarding Alkestis' death as a death for the *polis*.

that will remember him as one of the braver men. Ajax thinks of respite from the shame that will otherwise plague him. Ajax announces “To either live or die beautifully is what the well-born should want to do.” While Hektor’s rationalization rings more true for Alkestis considering that the Chorus sings of a commemorative monument for her later in the play, the same theme of reputation frames their choices, just as the need to preserve the *oikos* frames the women’s pleas for their husbands to remain. The reference to these famous scenes offers not only a similar emotional resonance to the farewell between Alkestis and Admetus but it also serves to accent the multiple confusions that have beset these characters since the initial decision to confute the limit of death.

Alkestis’ affiliation with the hero-spouses continues the confusion of boundaries; as the wife she will win the *kleos* and the noble death despite the fact that such death usually belongs to men. But the confusion—the fact that this death is not proper for her—is made evident by the multiplicity of concurrent “death genres” mentioned.¹⁴ Her affiliation with Hektor and Ajax points to two forms of death: on the one hand, voluntary sacrifice of one’s life for glory and civic-minded issues (she sacrifices herself for not only a citizen of Thessaly, but the king) yet on the other hand, to suicide, a traditionally ignoble form of death. While heroic civic death wins everlasting *kleos*,¹⁵ suicide was an act so vile as to affect great revulsion among Athenian citizens. Plato wrote in *Laws* that suicides “are to be buried individually—without even a single fellow-occupant of their grave—and ingloriously, in deserted and anonymous

14. Justina Gregory discusses the types of death experienced by Alkestis in wonderful detail. She also includes the puzzling aspect of the apparent illness that strikes Alkestis as she fades on stage; I will not address this type of death in my discussion.

15. cf. Gregory Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans*.

locations, the graves unmarked and nameless" (873D).¹⁶ This claim offers a stark contrast to the scenes in *Alkestis* in which Admetus promises that he will join Alkestis in her tomb ("for I shall have them bury me in the same chest" (363)) once he meets with death and in which the Chorus describes the monument that will mark her grave:

The monument of your wife must not be counted among the graves
of the dead, but it must be given its honors
as gods are, worship of wayfarers.
And as they turn the bend of the road
and see it, men shall say:
"She died for the sake of her husband.
Now she is a blessed spirit.
Hail majesty, be gracious to us." (994ff.)

Alkestis' voluntary death, a suicide, shall be treated as a civic sacrifice and what might have been considered an ignoble death will be rewarded with a monument.

In addition to the characterization of *Alkestis*' death as masculine and civic, her death appears to be a sacrifice for her *kurios*. Such self sacrifice, in spite of the fact that it destroys her *kurios*, resembles the death of the glory-winning (*eukleia*) virgins of Greek tragedy who sacrifice themselves on behalf of their *philoï*. *Alkestis* thus continues to transgress and redefine death genres as she, a wife and mother, dies winning masculine *kleos*, yet recalls the sacrificial deaths of virgin girls (*parthenoi*). Like the virgins of renown (Markaria, daughter of Herakles who sacrificed herself for her brothers in Euripides' *Heraklidae*, Polyxena, sister to Hektor, sacrificed on the tomb of Achilles; and Iphigenia, sacrificed by her father, Agamemnon, so that the

16. I credit both Nicole Loraux (1987), p.9 and David Whitehead ("Two Notes on Greek Suicide" *CQ* 43(ii) 1993, p.501-2) for this reference.

Greeks might sail to Troy), Alkestis finds freedom and power in her chosen death. Loraux writes “they [the *parthenoi*] turn to their own use the freedom of choice that characterized the *kyrios* [*kyrios*] by taking over the sacrifice imposed on them and turning it into their death, a death that is fully their own” (46). When Admetus begs Alkestis to accompany her to Hades she replies, “No, we ward this off by my dying for you” (383). She has become his protector, his *kyrios*, telling him where he may and may not go. In the play, the tropes of suicide, virgin sacrifice, and civic death collapse and converge into this one death of Alkestis that wins glory despite being suicide and destroys her *kyrios* despite her intent to save him and the *oikos*. Thus as an offering in place of a nobleman of Thessaly, her act becomes a civic sacrifice well deserving of praise while her womanhood makes such praise inappropriate. The confusion, resulting from the play’s transgression, simultaneously undoes the categories while redefining the genres. The irony of the multiplicity of deaths and situations calls the definitions and standards into question, exposing the impossibility of a world with rigid definitions.

In fact, Alkestis’ manner of death is wholly remarkable, an anomaly for any tragic death, male or female. Contradictory to the stage conventions of Greek tragedy, Alkestis dies on stage before the eyes of the Chorus, the citizens of Thessaly, and before the eyes of the audience. She is completely public. Other heroines, like Iocasta, Antigone and even Phaedra, however respectable or shameful, died in private and indoors. Even male heroes died off stage. According to convention, death is obscene. Loraux speaks of the tendency towards a private death:

In any case, whether they are womanly or manlike, women have at their disposal a way of dying in which they remain entirely feminine. It is the way of acting out their suicide offstage. It is meticulously

prepared, it is hidden from the spectators' view, and it is in its main details recounted orally (Loraux, 20).

Alkestis then transgresses stage, as well as gender, convention with her death on-stage. Not mediated by description, the event is manifest. However, her death, as a sacrifice of sorts, might very legitimately fit into the public world and agrees with female participation. This convergence of public death and sacrifice casts previous definitions and categorizations into a liminal realm to await renegotiation. It delights in the play where categories cease to have meaning, where feminine and masculine, public and private, religious and secular, god and mortal, lose the preciseness of their distinctions. Appropriate action ceases to have meaning in a structure that does not maintain in the midst of violation. The image of sacrifice continues with Death's promise to consecrate her death and "dedicate her with my sword" (74). While a common signifier of death, the sword also signifies a masculine death in Greek tragedy (Loraux, 12-3) While Alkestis' death does not physically occur by the sword, the suggestion lingers as a hint of the deaths of male heroes such as Ajax who even in suicide chose the sword as the instrument of death. Alkestis' death exceeds the conventions once ascribed to a woman's death in tragedy, not to mention the tragic death itself. Again, her death effects the breakdown of standards and limits that once governed the tragic and social realm.

As Alkestis experiences the confusion of dissipating boundaries so too does her husband, Admetus. Like Alkestis, he too finds himself in a liminal zone. His mourning is interminable; his life is the same as death; he frets about his inability to both enter the home and leave it (944ff.). As a result of these blurred distinctions, Admetus meets with feminization as Alkestis enters

the masculine realm. "Since a fine death is essentially virile and the loyal wife has taken the man's place, this tolma has the recoil effect of feminizing the well-loved husband." 48 Indeed, Alkestis' act and Admetus' behavior prompt Admetus' agitated rumination:

And anyone who hates me will say this of me:
"Look at that man, disgracefully alive, who dared
not die, but like a coward gave his wife instead
and so escaped death. Do you call him a man at all?
he turns on his own parents but he would not die
himself." (954-7)

Notably, the inversion is never complete since simple exchange keeps the limits erected. In this liminal state these characters undergo a process, but the completion resides in the redefinition, not in straightforward violation. Thus Alkestis retains feminine identification—virgin sacrifice with civic duty—while Admetus will become feminine while still being masculine. The preciseness of the locus is lost rather than maintained through straightforward exchange.

Throughout the duration of the play Admetus increases his affiliation with the things of the *oikos* as his wife leaves. As we have seen, in his farewell to Alkestis he takes the intimated roles of Tekmessa and Andromache. He becomes the guardian of things within; the use of words referring to the house abounds (Burnett, 257). Not only does he promise never to remarry, but he agrees to take on the role left vacant by Alkestis. When she tells him "And now you must be our children's mother, too, instead of me," he readily agrees. She makes many requests for his future actions in her house (*emon domon*, my house (304)), thus not only encouraging his participation in the *oikos*, something required of a man, but his following her rule as *kurios*.

Helene Foley points out that "Male over-interest in private concerns is often represented in the language of the text as feminine or feminizing" (Foley, 153). While a man's participation in the *oikos* as *kurios* was understandable and expected, relinquishing the role to adopt the role of his departing wife distresses the original structure.

His plea that she prepare a room in the afterlife for him emphasizes his newly adopted positionality. Such a plea suggests an inversion of the traditional marriage in which the wife joins the husband in the house he has prepared. R. Seaford notes, "the means of the continuity of the household is marriage, which, as patrilocal generally requires the introduction of a woman from another household" (151). Admetus suggests joining the house of Alkestis in marriage. The connection of tomb and marriage chamber is not unfamiliar in Greek tragedy. Admetus' wish to die with his wife has the effect of feminizing him within the framework of Greek tragedy. Within this context, death functions as an extreme aspect of marriage. To die with one and share a tomb is parallel to living with one in a marriage chamber. Loraux explains, "to die with...A tragic way for a woman to go to the extreme limit of marriage, by, it must be said, drastically reordering events, since it is in death that 'living with' her husband will be achieved" (26).¹⁷ After Alkestis' sacrifice Admetus appears to take the feminine role with respect to the *oikos*.

Admetus continues his affiliation with the feminine figure according to cultural and literary categories when he tells Pheres, his father, "I consider it right for her [Alkestis] to be my father and mother" (646-7). This claim recalls the farewell scene between Hektor and Andromache during which she begs him not to leave because "You are my father and reverend

17. Earlier in the text she offers an extensive list of the women who died in order that they might "live with" their husbands.

mother.” Admetus also indicates further inversion of the traditional manner of marriage in Athenian society in which a woman left her father’s home to join her husband as her *kurios* and only family—a practice referenced in the text by Admetus’ description of Alkestis as a woman who lost her father and came to live in his home (535). Not only does Admetus accept a feminine role within the *oikos* but he also breaks the continuity of his family line when he tells Pheres “I am dead as far as you are concerned, and if because / I found another savior, I still look on the sun, / I count myself that person’s child and fond support” (666-8). Emily McDermott writes “Greek society dealt with the complicated issues of the orderly functioning of the family, the perpetuation of the family line, the relations between generations, and societal continuity from one generation to the next” (McDermott, 82).¹⁸ As he refuses himself the continuity of his original lineage he brings the entire structure of marriage into question. Not only then does Alkestis’ act result in the destruction of her own household as acknowledged by Admetus, but Admetus’ reactions continue its destruction by removing the purpose from the structure. It is indeed an “empty marriage”. Admetus’ rash dismissal of his father also stands contrary to Greek protocol of family behavior. As is written in the *Supplices* “For wretched indeed is that child who fails to serve his parents in their turn” (361). Admetus disrupts the continuity of the family line and his obligation to his parents. Not only then do the divisions of gender fall apart but so too does the structure that these categories compose. Individual departures from the appropriate roles, both socially determined and precisely defined, results in the disintegration of the structure itself.

18. J.P. Vernant also describes the perpetuation of the *oikos* as the object of marriage in *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece*.

Admetus continues to act against traditional structures, feminizing himself while destroying all around him. Notably, his wish to die also offers the effect of feminization. He claims “for this / and less he could bind the noose around his neck” (229). Loraux, who earlier noted the masculine dynamic of death by the sword also notes that hanging is a traditionally feminine mode of death (14). This wish to hang himself, to be entangled in rope, signifies not only a feminine death but also an ignoble one. Ironically, Loraux points out that the idea of suicide was so distasteful and inappropriate in Greek society that there was no word for the act. When suicide was mentioned, the word was the same one that denoted the murder of one’s parents. Admetus’ wish for suicide and his wish that his parents die in his stead come together then compounding Admetus’ odd disinterest in reputation and *kleos*.

The return of Admetus’ interest in reputation signals the return of propriety in the clear definition of place, and the end of this period of transgression. As Alkestis’ quest for feminine virtue leads her into masculine *kleos* of everlasting fame, Admetus’ concern for his masculine role in the *oikos*, as its public representative, permits him to reconstruct the *oikos* and the reconstruction of himself in the *polis*. Significantly, another violation of protocol, a transgression of sorts, initiates this transformation.

When Admetus first greets Herakles he perpetuates the liminality that besets his home by offering only nebulous answers regarding the status of his household. Herakles, concerned by the presence of mourning announces that he will find lodgings elsewhere. Admetus answers, “No my lord no, the evil must not come to that.” He explains his decision to the Chorus upon their frantic questioning:

And if I had driven from my city and my house

the guest and friend who came to me, would you have approved of me more? Wrong. My misery would still have been as great, and I should have been inhospitable too, and there would be one more misfortune added to those I have, if my house is called unfriendly to its friends. for this man is my best friend, and he is my host whenever I go to Argos, which is a thirsty place. (553ff.)

The visit of Herakles has reminded Admetus of his duties within the house as host to strangers and friends. Notably, in the Greek, lines 558-9 effect a chiasmus of the words *domous* and *xenou*—*domous* is the first word in line 558; *xenou* is the last on line 559—which signifies Admetus' remembered role in this house. Strangely though, this favor that he gives to Herakles as host is one that is excessive; it is unlikely that any member of the audience would have considered it inappropriate to turn away a guest when the house is in mourning. As Herakles notes "It is always wrong / for guests to revel in a house where others mourn" (541). Thus Admetus' concern for reciprocity in this *xenia* (guest-host relationship) seems somewhat misplaced or excessive. However, it is this excess that eventually causes the restoration of his household making him the trusty guardian of things within. His excessive gift to Herakles causes Herakles to return his favor in kind; he drunkenly runs down to Hades to wrestle Death for Alkestis and returns her to Admetus.

Returning the Limits: Herakles, the Embodiment of Transgression

Not only is Herakles' gift to Admetus transgressive but Herakles himself exists in literature as an embodiment of transgression. Resting on the cusp of many distinctions, Herakles

himself is a borderline figure, an "intentional paradox" (Kirk, *Myth*). He is the combination of multiple traditions redefining himself according to his context. He is savior and murderer, slave and free hero, comic and tragic, divine yet mortal (Kirk, *Methodological*). To the Athenians he was a glutton and a buffoon, to the Thebans he was a figure of worship (Demand).¹⁹ Like the creatures who lie beyond the limits of the known on a medieval map, Herakles is seen as monstrous in his divinity with powers beyond the expected. By containing a plethora of contradictions and ambiguities Herakles emphasizes the divisions, especially as such ironic and inherent contradictions highlight each story of the hero. Such an existence offers Herakles the ability to re-establish the limits lost in this play. As a locus for disparate elements, the play of the oppositional combination brings the limits to the fore by providing their violation. As transgression is the combination and subsequent separation of limits, categories and tropes, Herakles embodies the convergence of oppositional forces at the same time he establishes limits.

Herakles reminds the audience of his other disparate identities upon his entry into the play. His status as servant is made readily apparent. The Chorus meets him and asks about his next task. He must master the Bistonian horses in order to return Diomedes' chariot; a task he cannot refuse (487). Herakles lacks free will in his life in spite of his noble and divine ancestry. At the same time, Admetus' acknowledgment of their reciprocity in the guest-host relationship (*xenia*) elevates his status. These diametrically opposed social identities clearly merge in the characterization of Herakles.

19. The Thebans had a rather tenuous affiliation with Herakles considering that his only link to Thebes was his marriage to Megara, daughter of Kadmos. This marriage ended in tragedy when in a fit of madness, Herakles killed her and, according to some accounts, their children

Herakles is also a demi-god and thus exists simultaneously as divine and mortal. Yet the very fact of his mortality also brings into question the earlier distinction between man and god practically and etymologically determined by the limit of death. Just as Apollo's gift to Admetus disrupted that once certain distinction of man and god based on mortality, Herakles' very existence calls this distinction into question. His internal conflict as a divine mortal manifests in his physical interception of Death. It is as if he tangibly negotiates his own paradoxical situation. Other demi-gods who boast natures of internal conflict also contravene death. For example, Dionysius transgresses death through his annual rebirth; he rises only to find his death imminent. However, in Herakles' transgression, he wrestles Death to save another from its limit.

Like Dionysius, Herakles stands on the cusp of not only god and mortal, but masculine and feminine as well. Already the manner of death by which he is known, poisoned by his garments suggests a feminine demise of entanglement in garments for this hyper-masculine figure. His hyper-masculinity also seems to place him as the object of a gaze, a distinctly feminine positionality.²⁰ While men did function as the object of the erotic gaze in Greek art, the position as object implies a passivity that stands in opposition to the active gaze. This masculine figure is also known for his servitude to women. Even in his name, his glory belongs to Hera, the jealous goddess who directs his tasks and labors (Herakles or the *kleos* of Hera). Loraux writes "The myths take insistent delight in putting Herakles at the service of women, or at least at the ser-

20. While Kinder's discussion about Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone is anachronistic, it is also notable: "Yet the irony is that the very hyper nature of their constructed masculinity positions these supermen, like women on movie screens and billboards, as objects of spectacle for the erotic gaze of spectators" (Kinder, 3).

vice of a female will" (26). This particular service recalls the play of roles between Alkestis and Admetus; she becomes the *kurios* who instructs Admetus as to his role within the house. It is also significant then that Herakles puts himself in the service of the feminized Admetus in order to return Admetus to the role of *kurios*.

Not only in his service to women does Herakles disrupt traditional gender dynamics but in the Herakles mythology, he engages in the womanly crime of infanticide. Euripides relates this myth in the tragedy, *Herakles*. In the tragedy, after he has committed his crime, Herakles considers all the women who have acted and experienced as he has. Loraux describes the scenario:

Finally, the murder of his sons is a woman's crime and, in the fit of madness in which he kills them, Herakles equates his suffering to that of the infanticidal mothers—a connection Euripides' underscores by means of the Chorus. When he returns to himself, the devastated hero (according to Diodorus) stays 'idle for a long time inside his house,' like a woman before confronting once again the perils where a man wins glory; but Euripides has already portrayed him as desolate, seated like a woman and veiled like a woman so as to escape every glance (Loraux, 28).

Although Herakles did not serve as a companion piece to Alkestis an impression of this masculine and feminine hero could possibly inform the character dynamics of Herakles within this play, especially considering his position in this world of disrupted categories. The fact that Herakles sits veiled after this violent breach of infanticide also recalls Alkestis' veiled return, which signals in turn the return of questions about boundaries and about gender categories.

Stories of Herakles' sexual liminality continue far into the future canon. Ovid tells a story of Herakles which emphasizes gender confusion; while this story does emerge at a much later date, thus threatening to make this example very anachronistic, it is likely that a germ of this story existed in Euripides' time. During Herakles' period of servitude to Omphale, the Lydian queen, they engaged in a festival of Dionysius and thus exchanged clothes. After the festival they fell asleep still clad in each other's clothes. That night a satyr came to rape Omphale. Reaching out to feel the garments he felt the lion skin on the body of the sleeping Omphale and subsequently withdrew believing the figure to be Herakles. He then touched Omphale's soft *peplos* on the sleeping Herakles and attempted to rape him. Herakles awoke and killed the satyr thus preventing his unwanted penetration; however the significance of the episode remains. We find a Herakles with an ambiguous gender role. Servant to this woman, Herakles also exchanges clothes with her only to become an object of male desire.²¹ Omphale's name is also significant as her name means "navel" which could very well indicate procreative power possessed by women. At the same time the word *omphalos* has referred to the genitalia (especially that which protrudes). Thus the name, signifying female power can also signify sexual power, especially in the form of erectile tissue. The feminization of erectile tissue may have likely resonated as a troublesome violation of gender categories. The *pep-*

21. The desire of the satyr actually falls under the rubric of excessive (masculine) sexuality. Satyrs seem to serve as figures for licentiousness. Their hybridity (equine and human) and their affiliation to Dionysus might also indicate their position as transgressive figures. For a detailed and useful discussion on satyrs, please refer to François Lissarague's "The Sexual Life of Satyrs" in *Before Sexuality*.

los itself also recalls Herakles' ambiguous position within the categories: the *peplos* causes this hyper-masculine hero to be mistaken for a woman and to be threatened with rape, and thus passivity, although murdering the satyr reminds the audience that Herakles also occupies the active position; the *peplos* also reminds the audience of Herakles' feminine death, and the death reminds one of the lost distinctions between man and god that Herakles embodies.

This figure of liminality enters the story with a breach of protocol. Admetus invites him to be a guest in his house of mourning and Herakles agrees despite his initial protests. The drunken revelry that follows allows him to become a character in a satyr play who invades this tragedy; indeed, the play is transformed during this scene into a satyr play (747ff.). The servant in attendance describes Herakles as wreathing his head with myrtle branches and howling off-key (759-60). Herakles attempts to seduce the slave by inviting him to drink alone with him in this scene reminiscent of the satyr play *Cyclops* (Poole). During the time between his labors, this serious hero enters the realm of the burlesque. Having transformed the tragedy into a satyr play he continues to manipulate the structure by returning Alkestis, forcing a union and thus offering the ending of a comedy. Like transgression, he must disrupt the form and then redefine the framework before he instigates the reconstruction of the limits. Entering a tragedy, Herakles embarks upon acting out a satyr play, a time of drunkenness that might recall the bacchanal: the liminal zone of drunkenness that Dionysius, another transgressive figure, provides. However, this bibulous revelry is entirely inappropriate so still confused with wine, Herakles transforms the play into a comedy that ends in a happy resolution, and thus a reconstruction of (temporarily) lost limits.

Herakles' tendency to establish limits, despite his other tendency to accommodate oppositional forces within his person, arises throughout the drama. In the face of Admetus' deliberate attempt to confuse Herakles, the hero makes the statement "the point of death is death and the dead are lost and gone" (527). Interestingly enough, he must violate his own statement, his own self-imposed limit, in order to restore order. At the same time, Herakles does not abolish the limit, he only repositions it as he assures the postponement, not the abolition, of Alkestis' and Admetus' death. Indeed it appears that Herakles consistently violates his original sentiments and limitations before he reconstructs them to his, and the other characters' satisfaction. For example, although he claims it is always wrong to celebrate in a house where others mourn, he does so. While his guest chamber ought to be apart from the mourning, it is the presence of the mourning servant who informs Herakles about the truth of the situation. Yet having broken this self-imposed limit, Herakles instigates the restoration of the broken *oikos*. Indeed, Herakles' particular situation, his tendency to set limits and transgress them, redefining his original sentiments—the dead are not lost and gone; it is sometimes beneficial to revel in a house of mourners—indicates the other facet of his transgressive tendencies: he embodies the play of the limit. He establishes limits, violates the limits and then re-establishes them. Such is the play of transgression.

Once Herakles returns Alkestis, he repairs many of the breaches provoked by the initial transgression. The categories will once again function with meaning. Herakles returns Alkestis in a silent, veiled and anonymous state; the state deemed appropriate for women and one that refuses the *eukleia* that earlier threatened fame, recognition and praise. Her anonymity is made evident not only by the veil but by the lack of specific identity

offered in Herakles' introduction. Indeed Admetus does not recognize this woman who was once his wife; the woman who sacrificed herself so that he could live; the woman whose image he promised to sleep with night after night until his death. This figure who once chanced to be worshipped as a god for her service—thus indicating a service to the *polis*—returns as a service to the *oikos* (1024). She no longer threatens to destroy the *oikos* she once thought to protect. Her return also restores Admetus' distinction between life and death. When Herakles returns (but has not yet given Alkestis back) he and Admetus engage in a discussion in which Admetus confesses his feeling of loss as well as the loss of distinction between life and death. "You can say time will soften it," Admetus tells him, "if time means death" (1086). Herakles replies "A wife, love, your new marriage will put an end to this." While the line is taken to mean the end of mourning, the implication is that Admetus' inability to tell the difference between his life and his death will also come to an end.

This gift will return the once banished limits just as it returns the now subdued Alkestis. Once Admetus accepts the gift Herakles tells him "Your grief is over now, your luck is back," he also asks Admetus to look at her and see if she does not seem most fitting as his wife. The word *prepein*, while implying the woman's similarity to Alkestis, also reminds the audience of the return to propriety as *prepein* (it is fitting) indicates. This wife will be more fitting as a wife since she will not threaten the *oikos* with her sacrifice that exceeds her duty as a wife and woman; she will no longer possess her masculine *kleos* for her noble service to the *polis*. Indeed, this Alkestis is mute and anonymous in the *polis*. This Alkestis will remain in the *oikos* according to Herakles' demand that Admetus take her inside the house. Herakles tells Admetus that he may not hear (*kluo*) Alkestis speak. The use of the word *kluo* reminds one of the *kleos* that Alkestis once had and

has now lost.²² Advising him in this manner Herakles re-establishes the limits of their marriage and their lives. As if to confirm the return to appropriate limitations, a remarriage (of sorts) occurs. Admetus leads Alkestis into the house *cheir epi karpo* (hand on wrist) in a manner mimicking traditional marriage form (Foley, 170). The implication of a remarriage signifies the end of the liminal period and the reconstruction of the categories. However, the postponement of their deaths, the transformation of the drama from a tragedy to a comedy, the maintenance of propriety as dictated by Herakles and the still dangling incident between Pheres and Admetus affirms that a change has taken place. Significantly, Alkestis' role still retains ambiguity since her new positionality as Admetus' parent has no resolution.

An embodiment of transgression and a transgressor himself, Herakles returns and redefines the limits disrupted throughout the play through his own violations. Indeed, his role within the play highlights the transgression that appears throughout the drama. Herakles comes upon a world undone by the transgression of death. Having lost its limits, the world of the drama lacks differentiation and all may exist in a horrific continuity. This world lacks shadows; disparate forces are united in the flash of passage. The clarity of gender roles has gone; social structures are now empty and meaningless. Herakles, who serves as the locus of disparate and oppositional identities, enters the liminal zone and resurrects the limits, while simultaneously violating his own self-determined laws. He brings an end to the drama, the play of limits, by means of his own transgression and internal play of identities.

22. Please refer to the earlier discussion of the etymological relationship of *kluo* (to hear) and *kleos* (glory).

Conclusion

Transgression of death frames the action of the drama. Alkestis elects to die in the place of her husband thus allowing him to evade the appropriate time and place of his death. Once the limit of death, which circumscribes the experience of life, ceases to apply, the structures within deteriorate. Life and its structures lose their clarity of purpose and identity. In Alkestis' extreme sacrifice she experiences a multiplicity of roles and deaths. Her loss of distinct positionality calls the meaning and purpose of the *oikos* into question. Concurrent with the individual collapse of identity and characterization is the collapse of the social matrix. Indeed, her sacrifice also disrupts the identity of Admetus who not only adopts a feminine positionality in the *oikos* and but also disrupts its function in Greek life when he severs all ties with his father. The initial violation of death has forced the drama into liminality, where the lack of differentiation invites all meaning and no meaning.

Yet transgression is not mere violation; it must also resurrect and redefine the limits. Herakles, a figure of liminal identity, enacts his own transgressions and thus redefines the action and meaning of the play. Not only does his presence alter the very genre of the drama, but it re-establishes the limits for the players within. He returns Alkestis to her role as wife to Admetus whom he considers the *kurios* of the household. Admetus' death, adopted by Alkestis, has been postponed for both. Herakles' violation provides the union that marks the end of the drama; his presence brings the final stages of the transgression. The hero of disparate identities effects the closure of the transgression that opened the play while he violates his own limits. Herakles brings a resolution to this cycle of transgression.

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