

Characters in ancient myth often do the unexpected, and sometimes the unforgivable. When they violate established rules of behaviour, they often have to pay a penalty. The Greeks referred to this sequence of crime and punishment as "hubris" (outrageous conduct) and "nemesis" (vengeance, retribution). For instance, one was expected to show respect to deceased relatives by performing certain rites and making an open display of grief. To celebrate the death of one's wife by holding a party would be an unspeakable offence.

Two myths deal with this theme. Admetus, king of Pherae, fell sick and seemed certain to die. However, the god Apollo, to whom Admetus had been generous, persuaded the Fates to let him live if he could find another to die in his place. In vain Admetus appealed to his relations; even his elderly parents refused to help him. Only his young wife Alcestis was willing to sacrifice herself for her husband. While sorry to lose her, Admetus was not above accepting her offer. As described in Euripides' play *Alcestis*, Admetus expresses deep sorrow as he escorts her to the grave on the fated day. Indeed he promises that he will grieve the rest of his life, and that never again will there be feasting or music in his palace. Yet no sooner is he arrived home than his friend Heracles shows up, unaware of what has happened. Though unable to deny that he is dressed for a funeral, Admetus pretends that the deceased is merely an acquaintance of the family. Ignoring the protests of the Chorus, he orders a feast prepared for his guest.

Admittedly, hospitality was an important custom in Greek society, but inviting someone to enjoy himself in a house of mourning exceeds what is proper—especially when the boisterous Heracles proceeds to get drunk and to sing loudly. Finally the exasperated servants tell Heracles the truth, and he decides to remedy the situation by ambushing Death at the tomb. Meanwhile, Admetus admits for the first time that he was wrong to let Alcestis die: she has acted nobly, while he has shown himself a coward. He is tormented by his loss. At this point Heracles returns with the rescued Alcestis. Admetus gives orders for a banquet and music, but this time with better reason. He concedes that he has gotten off lightly.

For another example we turn to the Babylonian myth of Tammuz. The love goddess Ishtar descends to the underworld, apparently intending to assert her power in the dark realm of her sister Ereshkigal. On arrival at the entrance, she gives a fabricated excuse for her visit. But as she passes through each of the seven gates, she is obliged to surrender some of the jewelry and clothing that give her power, and she reaches the underworld naked. The rightly suspicious Ereshkigal has her thrown into chains, and the judges of the underworld condemn her to death. Fortunately Ea, god of wisdom (the Babylonian counterpart of Apollo) intervenes, and Ishtar is allowed to return to life on condition that she provide a substitute.

But in releasing Ishtar, Ereshkigal finds a way to hurt her. Just as the Cyclops in Homer's *Odyssey* asks Poseidon to ensure that Odysseus returns to a troubled home, so the queen of the underworld sees to it that Ishtar will find her husband, the shepherd god Tammuz, celebrating her death. Ereshkigal instructs her servant, "Wash him with clean water, perfume him with sweet oil, dress him in a bright red garment. Let him play a flute of lapis lazuli, let courtesans soften his mood."

Meanwhile, Ishtar journeys from city to city, accompanied by underworld demons eager to carry off whomever she names to die in her place. At each stop the local deity, wrapped in rags, grovels in the dirt before her, and is spared. But when Ishtar comes to the home of Tammuz, she finds him dressed in a fancy robe and seated on a high throne, obviously enjoying himself. Angered by such hubris, Ishtar tells the demons to take her husband to the underworld. But with the shepherd god dead, the world suffers: no lambs are born, no grass will grow. Then Tammuz's loyal sister Geshtinanna arrives in the underworld, offering to take his place. Finally it is decided that they will alternate, each spending half the year in the land of the dead. This story, like the Greek myth of Persephone, was how the Babylonians explained the change of seasons.