


Suffering Women and their Skin(s): Representations of Female Bodies in Pain in Euripides

Las Mujeres sufrientes y su(s) piel(es): Representaciones de los cuerpos femeninos dolientes en Eurípides

Vasiliki Kousoulini

University of Patras, Greece

kousoulini@upatras.gr

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-6266-3859>

Abstract

In ancient Greek tragedy, the physical pain of male bodies is often depicted. Nonetheless, there are only a few examples of female bodies in pain. Tragic heroines rarely or never refer to their somatic anguish. In the Euripidean corpus, this pain is narrated by male and female Messengers. These Messengers in *Alcestis*, *Medea*, and *Hecuba*, describe the gestures and the miens of the heroines in pain with great detail. Special attention is paid to the skin of these women. This paper examines the gestures of these suffering heroines as responses to physical sources of pain, such as torment by the accumulation of excessive fluids under the skin, the eating of skin and flesh by poison, and the piercing of the skin by sharp objects.

Keywords: Euripides, Pain, Women, Embodiment, Gestures.

Resumen

En la tragedia griega antigua, a menudo se representa el dolor físico de los cuerpos masculinos. Sin embargo, hay solo unos pocos ejemplos de cuerpos femeninos que sufren. Incluso en Eurípides, las heroínas trágicas rara vez o nunca se refieren a su angustia somática. En el corpus de Eurípides, este dolor es narrado por Mensajeros masculinos y femeninos. Estos Mensajeros de *Alcestis*, *Medea* y *Hécuba* describen con gran detalle los gestos y los semblantes de las heroínas en el dolor. Se presta especial atención a la piel de estas mujeres que sufren. Este artículo examina los gestos de estas heroínas sufrientes como respuestas a fuentes físicas de dolor, como el tormento por la acumulación excesiva de fluidos debajo de la piel, el consumirse de la piel y la carne por la acción del veneno y la perforación de la piel con objetos cortantes.

Palabras clave: Eurípides, dolor, mujeres, encarnación, gestos.

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1. Introduction

The extant plays of ancient Greek tragedy depict the physical pain of male bodies¹ but rarely focus on female bodies in pain.² Tragic heroes often speak about the suffering they are experiencing³ but tragic heroines rarely or never refer to their somatic anguish.⁴ Nonetheless, Euripides shows a keen interest in the physical aspects of the suffering of women. Although the female body in ancient Greece was closely associated with pain⁵ we do not see the suffering of these heroines on stage. Euripidean women do not describe their somatic anguish; it is narrated by male and female⁶ Messengers.⁷ Although horrible scenes and hideous murders are often assigned to Messengers in ancient Greek tragedies,⁸ it seems that the description of female bodies in pain is a task that should exclusively be given to Messengers in Euripides.

In *Alcestis* and *Medea*, there are depictions of the demise of two women (Alcestis and the Corinthian princess respectively). Alcestis serves as a willing substitute for Admetus when his time of death comes and, at the start of the play, she is close to death. The sensory effect of wetness,⁹ an effect that can only be experienced through touch, plays a role in the depiction of Alcestis' dying body. Medea poisons the gifts sent to Jason's new wife-to-be. The death of the Corinthian princess is felt like an attack on her skin and flesh.¹⁰ Achilles' ghost asks for a sacrifice in *Hecuba* and Polyxena accepts to be killed on the tomb of Achilles as a blood sacrifice to his honor. The bloody sacrifice of Polyxena is described in *Hecuba*. Special attention is paid to the surface of the maiden's body: her skin, flesh, wound, and the actions surrounding her garments. Human pain is extralinguistic in the sense that it has the power to defy language.¹¹ Suffering bodies often become the bridge to the social since part of the bodily changes that take place are communicated, very often unconsciously: the facial expressions, the voice, the postures, the gestures, etc., that accompany forms of pain.¹² This paper focuses on the gestures,¹³ especially the ones revolving around skin,¹⁴ and their role in depicting female physical suffering in Euripides' tragedies. I examine the gestures of these suffering heroines as responses to physical sources of pain, such as torment by the accumulation of excessive fluids under the skin, the eating of skin and flesh by poison, and the piercing of the skin by sharp objects.

2. Sensing the wet bed in *Alcestis*

Alcestis, the heroine of Euripides' eponymous tragedy staged in 438 BC, chooses to die to save Admetus' life. Unlike other cases, Alcestis' death is presented on stage. Recently Worman noted that this is an unusual case and underlined that Alcestis' death is pain-free.¹⁵ Nonetheless, the last part of this statement is not necessarily true. In the First Episode, a female Messenger comes out of the house to describe Alcestis' condition to a chorus of men from Pherae. She is an *ἐξάγγελος*, a Messenger bringing out news from inside the house. We can assume that the Messenger followed Alcestis through the house.¹⁶ The maidservant is extremely sympathetic to the dying heroine and provides a vivid description of Alcestis' preparations for her death.

According to the Messenger, the heroine somehow felt that her death was near (lines 158-159: *ἐπεὶ γὰρ ἦσθεθ' ἡμέραν τὴν κυρίαν / ἦκουσαν*, "when she learned that the fated day had come").¹⁷ The verb used here to describe Alcestis' perception of her demise usually means "apprehend something by the senses".¹⁸ We should assume that Alcestis could tell that her end was near judging from the rapid appearance of the first symptoms of her mysterious illness;¹⁹ that is, Alcestis must have started experiencing a degree of physical pain. Alcestis performed a series of actions before her demise described by the Messenger. Gestures play an important part in the maidservant's description. Alcestis performed gestures that could be classified as non-communicative non-

speech acts (or praxical gestures).²⁰ Nevertheless, in an art form as highly symbolic as drama, even praxical gestures may carry communicative value.²¹ These gestures reveal Alcestis' condition. Some of them carry a great symbolic value in ancient Greek culture.²²

The heroine bathed herself (lines 159-160: ὕδασι ποταμίους λευκὸν χροῖα / ἐλούσατ', "she bathed her pale skin in flowing water") and dressed properly for her funeral (lines 160-161: ἐκ δ' ἐλούσα κεδρίνων δόμων / ἐσθήτα κόσμον τ' εὐπρεπῶς ἠσκήσατο, "and taking her finery from its chambers of cedar she dressed herself becomingly"). The world κόσμος, used here to describe Alcestis' funerary attire, could also have been used to describe the decoration of a bride.²³ Alcestis is then depicted as standing in front of the altar of Hestia and praying (line 162: καὶ σταῖσα πρόσθεν Ἑστίας κατηύξατο, "and standing in front of the hearth-goddess' altar she made her prayer"). Alcestis moved around the house, decorated all the altars with a branch of myrtle, and prayed (lines 170-173):

πάντας δὲ βωμούς, οἱ κατ' Ἀδμήτου δόμους,
προσῆλθε κάξέστεψε καὶ προσηύξατο,
πτόρθων ἀποσχίζουσα μυρσίνης φόβην

She went to all the altars in Admetus' house and garlanded them, breaking off
a spray of myrtle for each, and prayed.

The Messenger reports the heroine's prayer (lines 163-169). Unfortunately, there is no intratextual indication that Alcestis accompanied her prayer with gestures. We can assume that Alcestis adopted a prayer posture when she was uttering these words.

Alcestis once again moved around the house, entered her bedroom (line 175: κάπειτα θάλαμον ἐσπεσοῦσα, "then she entered the bedchamber"), and lamented her fate (lines 177-182). The heroine then fell on the bed and kissed it (lines 183-184: κυνεῖ δὲ προσπίτνουσα, πᾶν δὲ δέμνιον / ὀφθαλμοτέγκτω δεύεται πλημμυρίδι, "she fell on the bed and kissed it and moistened all the bedclothes with a flood of tears"). In the following lines, Alcestis is depicted as getting out of bed, bent with weakness, and exiting her chambers. Nonetheless, as the maidservant stresses, Alcestis had been repeating her actions several times, despite her fatigue (lines 185-188):

ἐπεὶ δὲ πολλῶν δακρύων εἶχεν κόρον,
στείχει προνωπῆς ἐκπεσοῦσα δεμνίων,
καὶ πολλὰ θαλάμων ἐξιῶσ' ἐπεστράφη
κάρριψεν αὐτὴν αὐθις ἐς κοίτην πάλιν.

When she had had enough of weeping, she tore herself from the bed and went
bent with weakness, and again and again, after going out of the chamber, she
turned back and threw herself upon the bed once more.

The Messenger not only describes Alcestis' praxical gestures but also provides information regarding her miens.²⁴ In lines 173-174, the maidservant stresses that Alcestis before entering her chambers was tearless, without a groan in her voice, and having a lovely color on her skin (ἄκλαυτος ἀστένακτος, οὐδὲ τοῦπιόν / κακὸν μεθίστη χρωτὸς εὐειδῆ φύσιν, "there was no tear in her eye or groan in her voice, nor was the lovely color of her skin changed by her looming misfortune"). After entering her chambers and seeing her bed, Alcestis wept (line 176) and then cried with excess and in a repetitive manner (lines 183-188). Alcestis' last gestures were communicative non-speech acts, according to Kerbrat-Orechioni's categorization.²⁵ Alcestis embraced and kissed her children and reached out her right hand to her distressed servants to say goodbye (lines 189-195):

παῖδες δὲ πέπλων μητρὸς ἐξηρημένοι
ἔκλαιον· ἡ δὲ λαμβάνουσ' ἐς ἀγκάλας
ἠσπάζετ' ἄλλοτ' ἄλλον ὡς θανουμένη.
πάντες δ' ἔκλαιον οἰκέται κατὰ στέγας
δέσποιναν οἰκτίροντες, ἡ δὲ δεξιᾶν
προὔτειν' ἐκάστω, κοῦτις ἦν οὕτω κακὸς
ὄν οὐ προσεῖπε καὶ προσερρήθη πάλιν.

Now the children were hanging onto their mother's gown and weeping, and she, taking them into her arms, gave them each her last kiss. All of the servants in the house were weeping and bewailing their mistress. She reached out her hand to each of them, and none was so lowly that she did not address him and receive his blessing in return.

The act of kissing and embracing her children needs no further explanation. Alcestis' other gesture though is a culturally-dependent one. The heroine reached her hand to the servants to wish them farewell. All of these communicative non-speech acts can be considered emblems; that is, symbolic gestures implying contact between dramatic characters.²⁶ As it has been argued, this Messenger expresses her personal opinion on Alcestis' sacrifice and she is highly sympathetic to the heroine (lines 196-198):²⁷

τοιαύτ' ἐν οἴκοις ἐστὶν Ἀδμήτου κακά.
καὶ καθανῶν τᾶν ᾤχετ', ἐκφυγῶν δ' ἔχει
τοσοῦτον ἄλγος, οὐποθ' οὐ λελήσεται.

Such are the troubles in Admetus' house. And if he had died he would be gone, but since he has escaped death, he lives with such grief as he shall never forget.

But did Alcestis feel any kind of physical suffering according to the Messenger? Could this anguish have been skin-related? What is the role of gestures described by the maidservant in depicting this pain?

Alcestis' imminent death is described as a νόσος in this tragedy. Apollo in the Prologue informs us that Alcestis was being held by Admetus due to her poor condition and gasped for air²⁸ (line 19-20: ἡ νῦν κατ' οἴκου ἐν χεροῖν βασιτάζεται / ψυχροραγοῦσα, "she is now on the point of death, held up by the arms of her family within the house").²⁹ In this messenger speech, the movements, posture,³⁰ and gestures of Alcestis attest to her suffering. Alcestis moved frantically around the house and repeated the same set of movements all over again in lines 185-188, revealing her agitation.³¹ The Messenger uses the same words as Apollo to describe Alcestis' condition: at the very moment she was talking to the members of the Chorus the heroine had her head inclined³² and gasped for air (line 142: ἤδη προνωπῆς ἐστὶ καὶ ψυχροραγεῖ, "she is already sinking and on the point of death"). Just before that, Alcestis' posture was quite similar, as the description of the maidservant attests (line 186: ἐκπεσοῦσα; line 187: ἐξιούσ' ἐπεστράφη; line 188: κάρριψεν).³³ Alcestis cried excessively inside her bedroom, revealing her emotional distress and, probably, her physical suffering. The maidservant uses the adjective ὀφθαλμοτέγκτος and the noun πλῆμμυρις in line 184, to describe Alcestis' tears. These tears, as we learn, soaked her bed (lines 184-185). As Combatti argues, the hapax ὀφθαλμοτέγκτω underlines the scrutiny of the lacrimation that calls to mind the ancient medical explanation of crying as a phenomenon linked to the patient's behavior of the eye and an excess of internal fluids.³⁴ In medical texts, ophthalmological diseases are often linked to an excess of liquid associated with the overflowing of fluid in the head.³⁵ Not only was the female flesh regarded as porous and soft in ancient Greek thought³⁶ but Alcestis' god-sent disease might have caused this marvelous excess of fluids expressed by her hyperbolic crying.³⁷ The maidservant does not only refer to the heroine's mental anguish but to the physical aspect of her illness as well.

Alcestis' skin is in the limelight in this messenger speech. The maidservant refers to the heroine's white skin in line 159 (λευκὸν χροῶ).³⁸ This reference belongs to the description of one of Alcestis' praxical gestures (bathing her body before her funeral). The second time the Messenger refers to Alcestis' skin is in lines 173-174 (οὐδὲ τοῦπιόν / κακὸν μεθίστη χρωτὸς εὐειδῆ φύσιν) claiming that the heroine's illness did not affect her beautiful skin. Alcestis' courage seems to go hand in hand with the preservation of her lovely skin. Until the moment she entered her bedroom and started to cry, Alcestis' skin was unchanged. The eye is an organ situated on the surface of the human body and is surrounded by skin. This organ is located at the edges of the human body. This is exactly the organ that manifests Alcestis' νόσος. The vivid depiction of the soaked eye and wet bed evokes a strong sensation of wetness,³⁹ a sensation that can only be experienced by touch. Alcestis'

physical pain can be felt by her and anyone else touching her bed, we should suppose, by touch, the sensation linked to the human skin.

3. Experiencing an attack on skin and flesh in *Medea*

In *Medea*, a play produced in 431 BC, the horrible death of a woman is described by a Messenger who is one of Jason's men and so formerly of Medea's household (lines 1136-1230). The servant is moved by the princess's death, although he shows understanding and sympathy for his former lady.⁴⁰ Before the messenger speech, in the introductory dialogue between Medea and the Messenger, the Messenger informs Medea that Creon and his daughter died through her poison (line 1126). Nonetheless, he starts his story from scratch⁴¹ and culminates in the death of the Corinthian princess and her father after providing a long and gory description of the events. The Messenger presents the events as an attack on the princess's skin and flesh by Medea's gifts.⁴²

The servant initially presents the young victim performing a series of non-communicative non-speech acts (or praxical gestures). He also refers to her miens and describes a gesture that could be considered an emblem. The Messenger starts by describing the succession of different expressions on the princess's face, which (to him) make it clear both how much she adores Jason and how much she dislikes his children with Medea⁴³ (lines 1149-1150). The princess welcomed Jason with a look full of love before seeing his children (lines 1145-1146: πρὶν μὲν τέκνων σῶν εἰσιδεῖν ξυνωρίδα, / πρόθυμον εἶχ' ὀφθαλμὸν εἰς Ιάσονα, "before she saw the two children, had eyes only for Jason"). The Corinthian princess, once she set eyes on Medea's children, looked away and veiled (lines 1147-1149):

ἔπειτα μέντοι προουκαλύνψατ' ὄμματα
λευκὴν τ' ἀπέστρεψ' ἔμπαλιν παρηίδα,
παίδων μυσσαχθεῖσ' εἰσόδους.

Then she veiled her eyes and turned her white cheek away, disgusted at seeing the children come in.

Her act of veiling can be considered a symbolic gesture within ancient Greek culture.⁴⁴ As Cairns observes, in this case, the princess acted as she would if she had taken an offense, and punished the offender by refusing further interaction.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, the princess at the sight of Medea's gifts brought by the children, changed her mind (line 1156: ἡ δ', ὡς ἐσεῖδε κόσμον, "when she had seen the raiment"). The soon-to-be-proved fatal gifts are referred to as κόσμος, not only by Medea but also three times in this tragedy (lines 787, 954, 972).⁴⁶ These gifts are a robe and a crown. As Mastronarde argues, the robe and crown mark this woman as a quintessential bride, as brides are specially dressed and crowned for their wedding.⁴⁷ The Corinthian princess immediately succumbed to the gifts' charm and tried them on (line 1159: λαβούσα πέπλους ποικίλους ἡμπέσχετο, "she took the many-colored gown and put it on"; line 1160: χρυσοῦν τε θεῖσα στέφανον ἀμφὶ βοστρύχοις, "and setting the gold crown about her locks"). The Messenger spends some time describing her grooming scene and informs Medea that the next gesture made by the princess is to look at herself in the mirror and arrange her hair (line 1161: λαμπρῶ κατόπτρῳ σχηματίζεται κόμην, "she arranged her hair in a bright mirror"). The Messenger consequently refers to one of the princess's miens: the princess smiled at her image (line 1162: ἄψυχον εἰκῶ προσγελώσα σώματος, "smiling at the lifeless image of her body"). This description does not lack sinister undertones since not only in ancient Greek culture were mirrors often considered ominous or uncanny in some way⁴⁸ but the phrase used to describe the princess's image (ἀψυχον εἰκῶ) can be regarded as a

gloomy omen of her impending death.⁴⁹ The princess did not stop there. She got up from her seat and paraded across the room (1163-1165):⁵⁰

κάπειτ' ἀναστᾶσ' ἐκ θρόνων διέρχεται
στέγας, ἀβρόν βαίνουσα παλλεύκω ποδι,
δώροις ὑπερχαίρουσα

And then getting up from her seat she paraded about the room, her white feet
making dainty steps, entranced with the gifts.

Medea's rival glanced at her beautiful legs several times (lines 1165-1166: *πολλὰ πολλάκις / τένοντ' ἐς ὀρθὸν ὀμμασι σκοπούμενη*, “glancing back again and again at the straight tendon of her leg”). The Messenger describes the body of the young woman as a beautiful spectacle and focuses on her face, head, and eyes with a brief description of the rest of her body,⁵¹ especially her legs.⁵² Now that the Messenger has tried to telescope the attention of the listeners upon the princess, he continues by describing her demise focusing on the same areas of her body.⁵³ From this point on, as the Messenger claims, things went awry and the beautiful body of the princess became a body in pain, a spectacle difficult to watch (line 1167: *τὸνθὲνδε μέντοι δεινὸν ἦν θεᾶμ' ἰδεῖν*, “but thereafter there was a terrible sight to behold”).

The servant describes the embodied response of the young woman to the poisonous gifts including many gory details to an even greater extent than most other messenger speeches concentrated on visceral niceties.⁵⁴ As the princess's physical pain was so excruciating, the only thing left to do to somehow communicate it was gesturing.⁵⁵ She had remained silent for a time (lines 1181-1182). Nonetheless, even her silence was able to speak volumes about her physical suffering.⁵⁶ The body of Jason's bride-to-be seems to undergo a process of dissolution.⁵⁷ The first thing the viewers of this horrible scene noticed was the change in the color of the princess's face (line 1168: *χροῖαν γὰρ ἀλλάξασα*, “for her color changed”). After that, the woman's legs started to tremble and she turned back and stumbled (lines 1168-1169: *λεχρία πάλιν / χωρεῖ τρέμουσα κῶλα*, “and with legs trembling she staggered back sidelong”). She managed to fall into a chair and not collapse to the floor (lines 1169-1170: *καὶ μόλις φθάνει / θρόνοισιν ἐμπεσοῦσα μὴ χαμαὶ πεσεῖν*, “and by falling on the chair barely escaped collapsing on the floor”).

The princess's gestures were not enough to communicate the density and depth of her physical pain to all viewers of this spectacle. As the Messenger says, a woman thought that a frenzy from Pan or one of the other gods had come upon the young woman and raised a festal shout to the god (lines 1171-1173). The details of the Corinthian princess's symptoms appear as objects of this old woman's gaze.⁵⁸ The woman notices the change in the princess's color by describing her paleness (line 1175: *αἶμά τ' οὐκ ἐνὸν χροῖ*), seeing the white foam coming out of her mouth and her eyes rolling back (lines 1173-1175):

πρὶν γ' ὄρᾳ διὰ στόμα
χωροῦντα λευκὸν ἀφρόν, ὀμμάτων τ' ἀπο
κόρας στρέφουσιν

until she saw the white foam coming between her lips and her eyes starting
out of their sockets

The new gestures and miens of this body in pain make the viewers realize that the princess's condition is grave. As the servant says, the old woman shouts to lament for the distraction that had stricken the princess (lines 1176-1177). The rest of the servants ran to inform both Jason and Creon (lines 1177-1178).

The princess initially had not tried to communicate her pain by words or sounds. In lines 1183-1184, she is described as opening her eyes and moaning (*ὄτ' ἐξ ἀναύδου καὶ μύσαντος ὀμματος / δεινὸν στενάξασ' ἢ τάλαιν' ἠγείρετο*, “when the poor woman wakened from her silence, opened her eyes, and gave forth a terrible groan”).

Her embodied reaction to Medea's gifts is enough to make the Messenger grasp her anguish. He describes the young woman's pain as a double calamity attacking her body (line 1185: διπλοῦν γὰρ αὐτῇ πῆμ' ἐπεστρατεύετο, "for she was being attacked with a double pain"). The Messenger describes what he sees; that is, the dissolution of the princess's body by the gifts firmly attached to her head and white flesh (lines 1186-1189):

χρυσούς μὲν ἀμφὶ κρατὶ κείμενος πλόκος
θαυμαστὸν ἴει νᾶμα παμφάγου πυρός,
πέπλοι δὲ λεπτοί, σῶν τέκνων δωρήματα, λευκὴν ἔδαπτον σάρκα τῆς δυσδαιμονος.

The golden circlet about her head shot forth a terrible stream of consuming fire, and the fine-spun gown, gift of your sons, was eating into the wretched girl's white flesh.

The rival of Medea despite her pain tried to fight back and performed a series of movements and gestures. The princess stood up from her throne and started to run (line 1190: φεύγει δ' ἀναστᾶσ' ἐκ θρόνων πυρουμένη, "and all aflame she leapt from the chair and fled"), tossing her hair to shake off the crown (lines 1191-1192: σείουσα χαιτήν κρατὰ τ' ἄλλοτ' ἄλλοσε, / ῥίψαι θέλουσα στέφανον, "tossing her hair this way and that, trying to shake off the diadem"). Nonetheless, every time she shook her hair to get rid of the crown, the fire emanating from it blazed up twice as high (lines 1192-1194):

ἀλλ' ἀραρότως
σύνδεσμα χρυσὸς εἶχε, πῦρ δ', ἐπεὶ κόμην
ἔσεισε, μᾶλλον δις τὸσως ἐλάμπετο.

But the gold crown held its fastenings firmly, and when she shook her hair, the fire only blazed up twice as high.

She finally succumbed to her pain and her final gesture was falling to the floor (line 1195: πίτνει δ' ἐς οὐδας συμφορᾷ νικωμένη, "she fell to the floor, overwhelmed by disaster"). According to the Messenger, her beautiful body had become unrecognizable to everyone but her father (line 1196: πλὴν τῷ τεκόντι κάρτα δυσμαθῆς ἰδεῖν, "barely recognizable to any but her father"). The beautiful princess was transformed into an appalling corpse. The body parts that seem to have suffered the most were the ones formerly described as her assets: her eyes, face, and skin. All that had been left of the princess's body was dissolved human flesh (lines 1197-1202):

οὐτ' ὀμμάτων γὰρ δῆλος ἦν κατάστασις
οὐτ' εὐφυῆς πρόσωπον, αἶμα δ' ἐξ ἄκρου
ἔσταζε κρατὸς συμπεφυρμένον πυρὶ,
σάρκες δ' ἀπ' ὀστέων ὥστε πεύκινον δάκρυ
γνάθοις ἀδήλοισι φαρμάκων ἀπέρρεον,
δεινὸν θέαμα.

Her eyes no longer kept their wonted form nor did her shapely face, and from the top of her head blood dripped, mingled with fire, and her flesh dropped from her bones like resin from a pine-torch, torn by the unseen jaws of the poison, a dreadful sight to behold.

We should suppose that the bodily exhibition of the princess's pain made the servants not want to touch her dead body (lines 1202-1203: πᾶσι δ' ἦν φόβος θιγεῖν / νεκροῦ· τύχην γὰρ εἶχομεν διδάσκαλον, "and we were all afraid to touch the corpse, taught well by the event we had seen"). Nonetheless, Creon did not know because he had not been an eye-witness of her body in pain and shared his daughter's fate (lines 1204-1221).

The skin of the princess and the sense of touch⁵⁹ are in the limelight in the Messenger's description of the princess's physical suffering. Medea had used the princess's skin to poison her. The Messenger draws attention to the texture of the objects (the golden crown: 1160, 1186, 1193; the fine dress: 1188, 1214), stressing those aspects of the gifts that proved fatal to the princess.⁶⁰ The poison gets to the young woman's system through her skin and, although it affects her whole body, the symptoms of her poisoning become more visible through her skin and the organs situated in her skin. The Messenger and other viewers notice the paleness of the Corinthian woman (lines 1168, 1175), and her eyes and mouth, two of her physical edges located at the

surface of her body that manifest the symptoms of her affliction (lines 1173-1174). Finally, her metamorphosis from a beautiful bride-to-be to a horrendous corpse is attested by the dissolving of her flesh (lines 1197-1202).

4. Exposing and hiding skin in *Hecuba*

In line 484 of *Hecuba*, a play produced in 424 BC, Talthybius reaches Hecuba –whom a Chorus of Trojan women surrounds– to announce to her that the sacrifice of Polyxena has taken place and that he wants to fetch her to bury the corpse of her daughter (lines 508-510). In lines 511-517, Hecuba implores the Achaean Messenger to tell her all about the last moments of Polyxena. After that, the Messenger gives a lengthy speech and describes every detail concerning the young maiden’s bloody sacrifice (lines 518-582). Although sacrificing a young woman was an atrocious act, Talthybius finds a way to aestheticize this act and tries to control the horror produced by Polyxena’s slaughter.

Talthybius is highly sympathetic to the former Trojan queen and tells her that he took pity on Polyxena’s death (lines 518-520). He also describes who was present when the sacrifice took place and emphasizes the gestures performed by Neoptolemus, Polyxena’s killer. Neoptolemus and other people are described as performing a series of gestures concerning the sacrifice in lines 523-545.⁶¹ The most important ones are those concerning Polyxena’s restriction of movement. Neoptolemus took Polyxena by the hand and set her on the top of the mound (lines 523-524: λαβὼν δ’ Ἀχιλλέως παῖς Πολυξένην χερὸς / ἔστησ’ ἐπ’ ἄκρου χώματος, “and Achilles’ son took Polyxena’s hand and placed her on top of the grave-mound”)⁶² and a chosen band of young Achaeans followed to hold her and prevent her from struggling (lines 525-527: λεκτοὶ τ’ Ἀχαιῶν ἔκκριτοι νεανῖαι, / σκίρτημα μόσχου σῆς καθέξοντες χεροῖν, / ἔσποντο, “and young soldiers, specially chosen, followed, hands ready to keep your calf from bolting”). Neoptolemus’ gesture was a praxical gesture performed to start the sacrifice. Nonetheless, this hand gesture carries a symbolic meaning in ancient Greek culture. This gesture was performed by the bridegroom during the wedding ceremony.⁶³ This gesture was not only used in the context of marriage but also in that of abduction and rape.⁶⁴ Modern scholars believe that this gesture in *Hecuba* has an ambiguous meaning. Polyxena’s sacrifice is presented as a wedding to Achilles.⁶⁵ By presenting a violent act as a union with a dead hero, the Messenger attempts to smoothly incorporate violence into the ancient Greek system of social exchange.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, Talthybius interprets the gesture of the soldiers who hold down Polyxena as a conscious attempt to prevent her from escaping the sacrifice or showing any form of resistance in the final stages of the sacrifice when the young woman will have been overcome by pain.

In line 546, the formerly silent Polyxena, contrary to what was expected of a sacrificial victim, answered back to her future killer and Talthybius reports her speech (lines 547-552). Polyxena’s reported speech in 547-552 echoes, without exactly repeating, the words she spoke onstage in lines 342-378.⁶⁷ Polyxena declares that she died of her own free will, offered her neck to her slaughterers, and asked only one thing: to not be touched (lines 548-549: ἐκοῦσα θνήσκω· μὴ τις ἄνηται χροῶς / τοῦμοῦ· παρέξω γὰρ δέρην εὐκαρδίως, “I volunteer my death. Let no hand touch me, for I am glad to offer you my throat”). The young maiden asked to be set free to die without restrictions (line 550: ἔλευθέραν δέ μ’, ὡς ἔλευθέρα θάνω, “set me free so, (...) I die free”). Unfortunately, we are not in a position to know whether or not Polyxena’s words were accompanied by complementary gestures which reinforced her speech act. Polyxena’s plea was successful and the Achaeans set her free, answering the command of Agamemnon (lines 553-556). Polyxena’s unusual freedom of movement allowed her to perform a series of gestures that Talthybius describes in detail. In the following lines, as De Jong argues, this Messenger includes longer, more complex, or different descriptions of gestures and miens than usual.⁶⁸

Polyxena is described as grasping her robe and tearing it wide open from the shoulder straight down to her navel, showing her breasts to the Greek army, kneeling on one knee, and addressing Neoptolemus for a last time (lines 557-565). She called Neoptolemus “young soldier” (line 563: ὦ νεανία) and ostensibly showed him the places where he could strike his blow, as we can judge from the text (lines 557-565):

κάπεϊ τόδ' εἰσήκουσε δεσποτῶν ἔπος,
λαβοῦσα πέπλους ἐξ ἄκρας ἐπωμίδος
ἔρρηξε λαγόνας ἐς μέσας παρ' ὀμφαλόν,
μαστούς τ' ἔδειξε στέρνα θ' ὡς ἀγάλματος
κάλλιστα, καὶ καθείσα πρὸς γαῖαν γόνυ
ἔλεξε πάντων τλημονέστατον λόγον·
Ἰδοῦ, τόδ', εἰ μὲν στέρνον, ὦ νεανία,
παίειν προθυμῆ, παῖσον, εἰ δ' ὑπ' ἀχένα
χρήζεις, πάρεστι λαιμὸς εὐτρεπῆς ὄδε.

And when she heard authority's words,
she grasped her robe and tore it wide open
from shoulder straight down to her navel
and showed breasts that gleamed like a statue's
carved to honor the gods, and she knelt on one knee
to say the most courageous last words:
“Look, young soldier. If you would strike
my breast, strike here. But if my throat
is what you want, my neck is bared here.”

Polyxena's initial gestures are supposed to be non-communicative but they carry profound meanings. The maiden kneels on one knee and her posture brings to mind several statues of Aphrodite bathing.⁶⁹ In ancient Greek culture, statues were considered to “speak” under the right circumstances.⁷⁰ We should suppose that when she spoke to Neoptolemus for the last time and asked him to pierce either her bare chest or neck, Polyxena accompanied her words with communicative non-speech acts; that is, deictic gestures. Polyxena's final gesture after Neoptolemus had slayed her neck was to try to fall modestly to not expose what should not have been seen by the eyes of men, as Talthybius almost cryptically says (lines 566-570):⁷¹

ὁ δ' οὐ θέλων τε καὶ θέλων οἴκτω κόρης,
τέμνει σιδήρῳ πνεύματος διαρροάς·
κρουνοὶ δ' ἐχώρουν· ἦ δὲ καὶ θνήσκουσ' ὄμως
πολλὴν πρόνοιαν εἶχεν εὐσχήμων πεσεῖν,
κρύπτουσ' ἅ κρύπτειν ὄμματ' ἀρσένων χρεῶν.

And he, unwilling yet willing in his pity,
cuts her windpipe with the iron sword.
Springs gushed forth. But she even in her dying
took great care to fall modestly, hiding
all that should be hidden from men's eyes.

The effect that this scene had on the Greek men was remarkable. They were so impressed by her courage and nobility (571-580) that immediately after Polyxena's death, they covered her pyre with gifts and strew leaves over her corpse. They also criticized one of their comrades for not bringing a gift for the young maiden (lines 577-578: Ἐστηκας, ὦ κάκιστε, τῆ νεάνιδι / οὐ πέπλον οὐδὲ κόσμον ἐν χεροῖν ἔχων, “how can you stand there, you no-good, hands empty, no robe, no gift for the young one?”). The men responded to Polyxena's gesture as heroic: leaves are not only thrown at the dead but also at the bodies of the men victorious in athletic games (φυλλοβολία).⁷² Although Polyxena's gestures concerning the exposure and covering of her skin could have had

an erotic coloring,⁷³ Talthybius tries to idealize his sentimental tale of Polyxena's demise. His statue reference has a "remedial" function as it enables Talthybius (and by implication the Greek army as well as the tragic audience) to replace the arbitrary violence of the sacrifice with aesthetic pleasure, aiming for the "domestication and control" of tragic horror.⁷⁴ Nonetheless, the sinister facets of this bloody act cannot be completely hidden in this messenger speech.

Talthybius' beatified narration of Polyxena's sacrifice cannot completely conceal the violent nature of this act.⁷⁵ Polyxena was initially treated like an animal by the Greek men who were determined to continue the sacrifice no matter what her reaction would have been.⁷⁶ Polyxena spoke and gave Neoptolemus a choice to strike either her throat or her chest but Neoptolemus chose the most conventional method of sacrifice after some pondering (line 566). His choice is significant because sacrificial victims traditionally have their throats cut, while chest wounds are more commonly associated with the deaths of heroes.⁷⁷ Polyxena is denied the death of a hero. The physical brutality entailed in the young maiden's sacrifice is omnipresent in *Hecuba*, although Polyxena's blood-letting takes place off stage.⁷⁸ The Messenger, although he praises Polyxena's generalized statue-like beauty, refers to the specific parts of her body to which Neoptolemus' weapon was directed: the throat, windpipe, blood, and breath.⁷⁹ The sacrifice ended Polyxena's life and terminated the integrity of her beautiful body by piercing and bleeding it.⁸⁰ The wound left on her throat by Neoptolemus' knife left behind an aperture that terminated the fantasy of her body having the smooth and closed whole surface of a statue and exposed the fact that the human body is a container of insides threatening to spill out of wounds and other openings.⁸¹ The viewers did not see the wound inflicted on the beautiful body of the maiden but they heard gruesome descriptions of it. In the Parodos, the Chorus claimed that members of the Greek army demanded that Achilles' tomb be crowned with Polyxena's blood (lines 125-126: τὸν Ἀχιλλεῖον τύμβον στεφανοῦν / αἵματι χλωρῷ, "Achilles' tomb be crowned with new-blossomed blood"), and envisaged Polyxena's sacrifice as a violent and bloody act that should have been avoided at all costs (lines 150-153):

ἢ δεῖ σ' ἐπιδεῖν τύμβου προπετῆ
φοινισσομένην αἵματι παρθένον
ἐκ χρυσοφόρου
δειρῆς νασμῶ μελαναυγεῖ.

or else you must see her thrown on that tomb.
—A virgin stained red.
—Blood on her gold-clad neck.
—Blood in a gleaming black gush.

The Chorus imagined Polyxena dripping black blood from her throat (line 153: δειρῆς νασμῶ μελαναυγεῖ). The same image is repeated in the messenger speech by Talthybius.⁸² The Messenger narrates that Neoptolemus prayed to Achilles, raising the cup and offering him the "pure black blood" of Polyxena (lines 536-538):

ἔλθε δ', ὡς πίης μέλαν
κόρης ἀκραιφνῆς αἵμ', ὃ σοι δωρούμεθα
στρατὸς τε καὶ γῶ.

And come, taste a darker drink,
a girl's unwatered blood, the army's
gift and mine.

Neoptolemus then severed her windpipe so the blood gushed forth (lines 567-568 τέμνει σιδήρῳ πνεύματος διαρροᾶς / κρουνοὶ δ' ἐχώρουν, "cuts her windpipe with the iron sword. Springs gushed forth").⁸³ Talthybius

describes the exact moment Polyxena took her last breath (line 567) by providing an anatomical reference.⁸⁴ He repeats the same fact in line 571 (ἐπεὶ δ' ἀφῆκε πνεῦμα θανάσιμω σφαγῇ, “then, when sacrifice had stopped her breathing”). As Segal argues, the repetition of the word πνεῦμα, breath, keeps in the foreground the physical violence of ending a life.⁸⁵ In the following lines, the women of the Chorus interpret Polyxena’s sacrifice as belonging to a series of actions that led to the Trojan War causing scenes of universal horror and suffering.⁸⁶

Talthybius’ sympathy for Hecuba and Polyxena seems to have “something insidious”, not only because his report of the sacrifice suggests “an interpretation of the human sacrifice that elides its brutality”.⁸⁷ Although Talthybius is talking to the mother of this girl, he seems so absorbed in his description⁸⁸ that he does not hesitate to describe Polyxena’s breasts as “the most beautiful” (κάλλιστα) fixating on the potential sexuality of the maiden’s gesture.⁸⁹ Talthybius not only does not waver on eroticizing the young woman’s final moments but compares Polyxena’s breasts to the ones of female statues (lines 560-561). This “statue reference” also puts necrophilia into the picture. According to Michelini, Talthybius’ objectification of Polyxena’s body in his comparison of her nude torso to that of a statue brings into mind the fact that in Greek erotic lore, several people have been attracted to the lifeless image of a human body, a statue or a corpse.⁹⁰ Hecuba may be right to “translate” the scene described by Talthybius in this way.⁹¹ The Greek army’s gifts to the dead body of Polyxena are a sign of admiration but behind this kind of praise may lurk a form of fetishism.⁹² The κόσμος and the veil that one soldier should have brought to the corpse, according to the Greek men (lines 577-578), are the usual ornaments of a bride. Φυλλοβολία was also a part of the *makarismos* of the newly-wed pair at weddings,⁹³ and brides were supposed to receive the erotic admiration of the men who attended the ceremony. Talthybius’ description of the sacrifice of Polyxena “pulls the spectator up close to the girl’s body, detailing its parts”.⁹⁴ As Worman notes, although this type of detail is not uncommon in extant tragedy, and may well be especially prominent in messenger speeches, such close attention to bodies is never in the service of admiration of a naked virgin, and certainly does not include reference to her breasts and (perhaps) a suggestion of her sex.⁹⁵ The eyes (of the mind) of the listeners of the messenger speech are encouraged to become fixated on Polyxena’s body. Nevertheless, this body is a body in pain. This fact can shed new light on Polyxena’s puzzling gestures.

We do not learn a lot about Polyxena’s physical suffering. Nonetheless, Talthybius informs us that in her final moments, when the pain caused by her fatal wound would have been insufferable, she had the strength to cover what should not have been seen by the eyes of men (line 570). Although the phrase used (κρύπτουσ’ ἃ κρύπτειν ὄμματ’ ἀρσένων χρεών) is quite vague, modern scholars have suggested that Polyxena fell graciously to not expose her genitals.⁹⁶ The only thing that we learn about the way she fell is that besides the fact that she was dying, she put some effort into falling to the ground the way she did (lines 568-569). The world εὐσχήμων does not convey only the meaning of respectful and decent but also a beautiful, gracious way.⁹⁷ Scodel rightly points out that the exposure of Polyxena’s female genitals would not be considered beautiful, but ugly and ridiculous.⁹⁸ Perhaps Polyxena wanted to cover this perceived ugliness of her dying body but also the wound on her skin that transformed her statuesque figure into a bloody spectacle, into a form no longer whole and intact, a body touched by the sacrificial knife. The touch of this knife must have caused her pain, a pain that she did not wish to communicate. Zeitlin has long ago underlined the connection between touch and Polyxena’s passion for freedom.⁹⁹ Polyxena does not wish to be touched by others or touch others to save her life. The young maiden also refused to make a gesture of supplication towards Odysseus earlier in this tragedy (lines 342-344).¹⁰⁰ Polyxena before her sacrifice broke her silence and demanded not to be touched just like Iphigenia (*I.A.* 1544-1567) where the heroine explicitly says that she does not wish to be touched by any of the Achaeans (lines 1559-1560: μὴ ψαύσῃ τις Ἀργείων ἐμοῦ· / σιγῇ παρέξω δέρην εὐκαρδίως, “so then let none of the

Argives lay hands on me, for I will bravely yield my neck without a word”).¹⁰¹ Nonetheless, Polyxena by exposing and hiding her skin in *Hecuba*, manages to make her sacrifice “a show of untouchability”.¹⁰² Neoptolemus’ hands touch only the goblet and the knife and the soldiers use their hands to throw gifts at her, as a gesture from afar, and cover her dead body.¹⁰³ Polyxena’s indirectly touched skin manages to some extent to be latent after her demise.

5. Conclusions

We examined three messenger speeches that recount the sufferings of women who are on the brink of death. Alcestis’ physical pain seems minimal, although the heroine is overcome by fatigue and exhibits signs of shortness of breath. Creon’s daughter is being poisoned by her skin and experiences excruciating pain. We should suppose that Polyxena’s fatal wound, one that caused a flood of blood to come out of her neck, caused her a great amount of pain. Alcestis died on stage and her demise was not narrated by her maidservant. The Corinthian princess died horrifically and the servant described her passing. Polyxena was slaughtered and Talthybius narrated her sacrifice in a beautified way.

Describing the skin of a woman was a traditional way of praising her beauty in ancient Greek literature. The same happens here. In all of these cases, the beauty of the heroine is being exalted just before her demise. The demise of Alcestis, Medea’s rival, and Polyxena brings alterations to their skin and flesh. Alcestis becomes visibly pale, the Corinthian princess dissolves into a mash of skin and bones, and Polyxena’s lovely skin becomes wounded. The surface of these female bodies in pain exhibits the marks of their physical suffering. As physical pain cannot easily be described by the ones who feel it, the Messengers do not recount the words of these women in pain. The Messengers focus on the gestures of these Euripidean heroines that result in a series of non-communicative and communicative non-speech acts that speak volumes of their conditions.

Alcestis’ tears, caused by her emotional and physical condition, soak her bed. Behind Euripides’ medical description of Alcestis crying may lie the belief that the behavior of the eye of a patient depends on his/her balance of internal fluids. Alcestis’ illness could have caused her an excess of internal fluids, especially in her head. The heroine needed to engage in hyperbolic crying to feel better. The maidservant not only refers to the heroine’s mental anguish but also to the physical aspect of her illness. Initially, the skin of Alcestis does not change color as it was supposed to, but under it, excessive fluids might have been accumulating. The effect of the heroine’s condition attested by the wet bed can only be experienced by touch, specifically Alcestis’ touch, the maidservant’s touch, and the touch of others.

In *Medea*, the Messenger has the audience of his speech telescoped upon the beautiful body of the princess, her eyes, face, and skin, and continues by describing her demise by focusing on the same areas of her body. Foam comes out of the princess’s mouth, her eyes roll, she becomes pale, and her beautiful skin dissolves. Even if the internal audience is initially unable to fully grasp the degree of the woman’s physical suffering, her gestures make it understandable. Everyone who witnessed this horrible spectacle stays away from the corpse of the Corinthian princess. Creon’s daughter experienced an attack on her skin and flesh which caused her insufferable pain. Her “illness” is manifested through the skin of the sufferer, transmitted by touch.

Polyxena in *Hecuba* chooses to hide her pain. Talthybius also chooses not to focus on the horrible conditions of the young woman’s demise but on the beauty of her act and the bravery of her soul. Nevertheless, the gory details omitted have a way of entering the Messenger’s story. Polyxena is the victim of a brutal sacrifice who has her body bloodied and her skin pierced. The barbarity of this act cannot be completely concealed. The maiden wishes not to be touched and exposes and conceals her skin in a “a show of untouchability” while her skin is being touched by the sacrificial knife and the hands of the soldiers indirectly touch her through their gifts to her dead body. Her final gesture is to conceal her pierced body and damaged skin. Polyxena chooses to conceal the signs of her physical suffering and does not wish to communicate her pain.

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Notes

¹ Some of the suffering heroes are Ajax and Philoctetes in Sophocles' eponymous tragedies, Heracles in Sophocles' *Trachiniae*, Hippolytus in Euripides' *Hippolytus*, and Orestes in Euripides' *Orestes*. On the tragic representation of

disease and physical pain see also Biggs (1966); Padel (1985); Worman (2000); Valakas (2002); Budelmann (2006); Holmes (2008) and (2010); Allan (2014); Blanco (2020).

2 Worman notes that extant plays do not focus for the most part on female bodies in pain and some of the tragedies show more concern with male suffering. According to her, Euripides appears more interested in female characters' emotional distress. See Worman (2020, p. 28).

3 Worman argues that some of the suffering heroes exhibit signs of male exhibitionism in tragedy, where they indulge in showing off their wounded bodies. See Worman (2017, pp. 36-40).

4 Io in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* and Phaedra in Euripides' *Hippolytus* are the exceptions to this rule. Nevertheless, they are both inflicted by a mental disease that causes physical pain rather than a pure somatic illness. In Io's case, as other scholars have noted, her sickness is akin to divine-brought madness. Budelmann argues that Io's language "privileges madness but overlaps with that used by pain sufferers". See Budelmann (2007, p. 443). Ceschi characterizes her illness as a "demonic disease" and "a madness provoked by the divinity which twisted her perception of reality". See Ceschi (2020, pp. 142-143). According to Ceschi, Phaedra's νόσος is also a demonic disease inflicted on her by a divine being. See Ceschi (2020, pp. 146-148). Phaedra's symptoms have also been considered signs of delirium. See, for example, Knox (1952); Barrett (1964, pp. 189, 206-208); Goff (1990, p. 7); Halleran (1995) on the passage; McClure (1999, pp. 125-126); Allan (2022). Worman doubts that Phaedra's physical pain is exhibited on stage. See Worman (2020, p. 28).

5 See Cawthorn (2008, pp. 50-51).

6 In *Alcestis*, a maidservant describes the heroine's first actions which occur offstage (lines 152-198).

7 As Cawthorn notes, we must be careful when we are talking about female bodies in the Athenian stage. Women are absent from the stage; that is, we have an enactment of the female body by men. See Cawthorn (2008, p. 47).

8 See Caverno (1917, p. 263); Bremer (1976, pp. 41-43); De Jong (1991, p. 117). Worman notes that most messenger speeches do not focus on visceral details. See Worman (2020, p. 114). De Jong observes that not all murders are presented in the form of a messenger speech (e.g., the murders of the children of Medea in *Medea*, Lycus' murder in *Hercules Furens*, and Clytemnestra's killing in *Electra* are not narrated, but overheard). See De Jong (1991, p. 118, n. 2).

9 See Combatti (2020, p. 45).

10 See Worman (2020, pp. 114-115).

11 According to Scarry, "whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unshareability, and it ensures this unshareability through its resistance to language". See Scarry (1985, p. 4).

12 Dumouchel (1999, p. 15); Theodoropoulou (2012, p. 443).

13 De Jong notes that in messenger speeches, we often encounter descriptions of gestures. See De Jong (1991, pp. 140-143).

14 Worman argues that in Greek tragedy, the physical effects of emotional distress are displayed in the surfaces of female bodies as their flesh and skin bear the marks of the wearing, scoring, and melting that come with grief. See Worman (2020, pp. 28-29).

15 Worman (2020, pp. 28, 43).

16 See Barrett (2002, p. 82).

17 I follow the text and the translation of Kovacs. See Kovacs (1994).

18 See LSJ s. v. *αἰσθάνομαι*.

19 See Markantonatos (2013, p. 46).

20 See Kerbrat-Orechioni (2001, pp. 153-154).

21 See Capponi (2020, p. 342).

22 These gestures are performed before a funeral. See the analysis of Markantonatos (2013, pp. 46-48).

23 See LSJ s.v. *κόσμος*. On the conflation of the motifs of marriage and funeral in *Alcestis* see Rehm (1994, pp. 84-96).

24 As De Jong stresses, the narrator must describe the miens of characters in a narrative since the hearer/reader cannot see them for himself. In Attic tragedy, we often encounter descriptions of miens in messenger speeches. See De Jong (1991, pp. 140-144).

25 See Kerbrat-Orechioni (2001, pp. 153-154).

26 See Capponi (2020, pp. 343-344, 348, with further bibliography). On physical contact in ancient Greek tragedy see also Kaimio (1988).

- 27 See De Jong (1991, pp. 76, 107, 119, n. 131 with further bibliography, 150). Markantonatos argues that the tragic Messenger is a fully-fledged storyteller. See Markantonatos (2013, p. 4). According to him, this Messenger is “so emotionally involved in Alcestis’ ordeal that she is emboldened enough to speak her mind about Admetus’ choice with a slightly disapproving tone”. See Markantonatos (2013, p. 43).
- 28 See LSJ s. v. ψυχωραγέω.
- 29 Markantonatos notes the similarities in these two descriptions of Alcestis’ physical ordeal. See Markantonatos (2013, p. 54).
- 30 Combatti notes the emphasis put by the Messenger on Alcestis’ posture. See Combatti (2020, p. 48).
- 31 See Combatti (2020, p. 48). Valakas notes that postures in ancient Greek theater could be as expressive as movements. See Valakas (2002, p. 78).
- 32 See LSJ s.v. προνωπής.
- 33 See also Combatti (2020, p. 48). Telò argues that Alcestis eventually falls to the ground while being on stage. See Telò (2002, pp. 22-26).
- 34 See Combatti (2020, p. 45).
- 35 See Thumiger (2017, pp. 79-97).
- 36 See, for example, the Hippocratic treatise *Diseases of Women* 1.1. See also Combatti (2020, pp. 45-46).
- 37 According to Combatti, Euripides draws on medical ideas that considered lacrimation as an outlet for the excess of internal fluids. See Combatti (2020, p. 47), with further bibliography. In the Hippocratic treatise with the title *Diseases of Women* (1.1), we learn that women’s bodies absorb more moisture and need regular evacuation.
- 38 Barrett, commenting on the description of the skin of the Corinthian princess by the Messenger in *Medea*, argues that the traditional epithet “white” has a function in that passage recalling the princess’s delicate femininity at the moment of its destruction. See Barret (2002, p. 81). Sometimes the beauty of a heroine’s skin may be recalled before an alteration to her skin becomes visible.
- 39 See Combatti (2020, p. 45).
- 40 See Barrett (2002, p. 106).
- 41 See on this Barrett (2002, pp. 35-36).
- 42 Barrett underlines the use of the verb ἐπεστρατεύετο (line 1184) and its implications for this story. See Barrett (2002, p. 35, n. 91).
- 43 See De Jong (1991, p. 142).
- 44 For the uses and the symbolism of the veil in ancient Greek culture see Cairns (2002).
- 45 See Cairns (2005, p. 135). Cairns also notes that veiling in Greek epic poetry often signifies anger. See Cairns (2005, p. 135, n. 42).
- 46 The same word is used to describe the attire *Alcestis* chooses to prepare for her funeral (line 161).
- 47 See Hawley (1997, p. 46); Mastronarde (2002, p. 14). According to Torrance, the beautiful, poisoned robe and crown are unusual plot elements. See Torrance (2007, p. 289).
- 48 See Murray (1907, p. 94).
- 49 See Mastronarde (2002, p. 345).
- 50 On the cultural importance of walking and its use in demonstrating authority in ancient Greek culture see Bremmer (1992, pp. 16-23).
- 51 See Hawley (1997, p. 46).
- 52 In the violent scenes encountered in Greek tragedy, the descriptions are usually fixated on the body parts of the suffering bodies. See Γιώση (2017, p. 9).
- 53 See Hawley (1997, p. 46).
- 54 See Worman (2020, pp. 113-114).
- 55 We must admit that most of her gestures can be spontaneous and unintentional. Nevertheless, they facilitate the viewers of this spectacle and the listeners of the messenger speech to assume the princess’s condition.
- 56 On the communicative value of silence in Greek tragedy see Valakas (2002, pp. 78-79).
- 57 See Cawthorn (2008, pp. 54-55) who also notes that female bodies in ancient Greece were considered prone to dissolution.
- 58 See Barrett (2002, p. 95). According to him, this sequence, too, constitutes the equivalent of the shot / reverse shot in cinema.

- 59 For the role of the theme of hands and physical contact in *Medea* see also Flory (1978); Valakas (2002, p. 82); Torrance (2007, p. 289); Worman (2020, pp. 35, 81-85).
- 60 See De Jong (1991, p. 161).
- 61 De Jong argues that the Messenger here takes advantage of his position as narrator, and in his report pays lavish attention to his role. See De Jong (1991, p. 5).
- 62 I follow the text of Murray and the translation of Lemkbe and Reckford (see Burian and Shapiro 2010).
- 63 Grasping a woman's right hand or wrist is a familiar gesture from ancient Greek art and literature. The gesture is encountered in *Odyssey* (18.258) between Odysseus and Penelope and in Greek tragedy (e.g., *Alc.* 375-376, 1113-1115). It is also well-documented in ancient Greek art. See Sutton (1981, pp. 181-184).
- 64 According to Sourvinou-Inwood, in the 5th century BC, this gesture is more often used in abduction and rape scenes than marriage scenes. See Sourvinou-Inwood (1991, pp. 65-68).
- 65 See, for example, Foley (2015, p. 44); Papastamati (2017, pp. 376-377).
- 66 See Keyser (2011, p. 99).
- 67 See De Jong (1991, p. 128).
- 68 See De Jong (1991, p. 142).
- 69 See Worman (2020, p. 228, n. 47 with further bibliography). See also see Stieber (2011, pp. 145-150) on comparable statues of Aphrodite. In Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (line 242) the beauty of Iphigenia is compared to paintings. See on this Scodel (1996, pp. 121-126).
- 70 See Stieber (2011, p. 148). One prominent example is the "speaking statue" of the Colossus of Memnon in Egypt.
- 71 This gesture was praised by ancient commentators although some unnamed ancient scholar deleted line 570, considering it in bad taste. See Battezzato (2018, p. 150). This passage found imitators (e.g., *Ov. Met.* 13.479-80, *Suet. Iul.* 82.2). Battezzato believes that Polyxena's courage makes her a suitable role model for male heroes. See Battezzato (2018, p. 150). See also Friesen on Polyxena being used as an example of purity and courage in Late Antiquity and Byzantium.
- 72 See Foley (2015, p. 43); Papastamati (2017, p. 374); Battezzato (2018, p. 11). In the *Scholia* (see *Scholia* in Euripides, *Hecuba* 573-574), it is mentioned that leaves are cast on Polyxena's body as if she has won an athletic victory. Cf. Pind. *Pyth.* 4.240, 9.123-124. Dionysius of Halicarnassus (XI. 39.5-7) describes the use of this custom in honor of Virginia, who was killed by her father to preserve her chastity, threatened by the oligarch Appius Claudius. This custom is also mentioned in Sophocles' *Antigone* (lines 1201-1202).
- 73 Michelini (1987, pp. 158-170); Segal (1990, pp. 14-18); Rabinowitz (1993, pp. 59-60).
- 74 See Pucci (2003, pp. 158-159).
- 75 Some modern scholars recognize the barbarity and horror of this scene. See, for example, Vellacott (1975, pp. 192, 209-210); Segal (1990, pp. 114-118); Pucci (2009); Keyser (2011, pp. 96-98); Worman (2020, pp. 160, 192).
- 76 See Keyser (2011, p. 97). He also notes that the men have taken no account of the willingness and courage Polyxena demonstrated earlier by accepting her fate (lines 342-378). See Keyser (2011, p. 97).
- 77 See Loraux (1987, pp. 56-61).
- 78 See Worman (2020, p. 160).
- 79 See Segal (1990, p. 118).
- 80 On the associations between defloration and sacrifice see Loraux (1987, pp. 31-65). Hecuba states that Polyxena after the sacrifice is a virgin and not a virgin, a bride but not a bride (line 612: *νύμφην τ' ἀνυμφον παρθένον τ' ἀπάρθενον*, "bride and ghost's bride, virgin and virgin's ghost"). Pucci (2009), commenting on this scene, speaks about "archetypal fantasies built on the equations of bloody assault with rape, or on the connection between the blood of sacrifice and menstruation, or the spirit of aggression that the sexual violence of the sacrifice inspires in the warriors against their enemies".
- 81 See Worman (2020, p. 17).
- 82 See Worman (2020, p. 160).
- 83 See Worman (2020, p. 160).
- 84 This anatomical reference is not very clear. See Keyser (2011, p. 98, n. 110). Gregory (1999, p. 114) argues that the plural is likely poetic and thus refers to the trachea, which the priest severed during animal sacrifice.
- 85 See Segal (1990, p. 118).
- 86 See Worman (2020, p. 192).

87 See Segal (1990, p. 114).

88 He started his speech by telling Hecuba that he has to relive the moment Polyxena died (lines 519-520: *νῦν τε γὰρ λέγων κακὰ / τὲ γέγω τόδ' ὄμμα, πρὸς τάφῳ θ' ὄτ' ἄλλυτο*, (“my eyes filled when I watched your child die. Now memory must see her die again”).

89 See Friesen (2016, p. 628). Keyser argues that “the herald’s explicit comments on the female body and his erotic appraisal of it (*κάλλιστα*, 561)” violates “the “rigidity of tragic decorum” since descriptions of these parts of the female body were usually limited to brief and conventional remarks in ancient Greek tragedy. See Keyser (2011, p. 98).

90 Michelini, (1987, pp. 166-168). Naked statues were often eroticized. See also Papastamati (2017, pp. 371-372, with further bibliography). In *Alcestis*, Admetus promised to cherish a statue of Alcestis in his bed (line 353).

91 Hecuba tells Talthybius that she is afraid that the Greek men will molest the corpse of Polyxena (line 606). Michelini suspects that Hecuba is afraid that her daughter will fall victim to the men’s perverse desires. See Michelini (1987, pp. 166-168). Scodel also remarks that however carefully the tension is manipulated, the virgin's exposure to male desire is dangerous, an invitation to rape. See Scodel (1996, p. 126). For Hecuba’s “translation” of Talthybius’ speech see Worman (2020, p. 192).

92 See Rabinowitz (1993, p. 60). According to Worman, these men “witness a virgin slaughter and their response (as told) is, “What a brave girl! How moving! Let’s give her some trinkets!”. She argues that the reaction of these men to the spectacle of Polyxena’s dying can be “a disturbing model for spectation in the Theater of Dionysus”. See Worman (2020, p. 191).

93 See Oakley and Sinos (1993, p. 27); Papastamati (2017, p. 375).

94 See Worman (2020, p. 229).

95 See Worman (2020, p. 229).

96 See, for example, Scodel (1996, p. 122); Battezzato (2018, p. 150); Worman (2020, p. 229).

97 See LSJ s.v. *εὐσχήμων*.

98 See Scodel (1996, p. 122).

99 See Zeitlin (1991, p. 93).

100 See Zeitlin (1991, p. 93); Worman (2020, p. 228).

101 See Worman (2020, p. 228); Pucci (2009). I follow the text of Murray (1913) and the translation of Coleridge (1891). Iphigenia’s sacrifice is also narrated by a Messenger.

102 See Zeitlin (1991, p. 74).

103 See Zeitlin (1991, p. 93). Rabinowitz (1993, p. 59): “Polyxena having refused to let anyone touch her, nonetheless suffers their touch via these gifts”.