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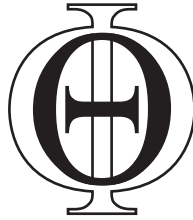
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International Journal for Philosophy and Theology

PHILOTHEOS

Vol. 20.2 (2020)

pp. 169–340

Abbas Ahsan:

Analytic Theology and its Method 173

Marina Ćakić:

Philo's version of the origin of the Septuagint 212

Milan Kostrešević:

Religion, Etnizität und Politik
im Kontext der Rede über Beschneidung (Gal 5, 2 – 6) 222

Aleksandar Danilović:

The Giant and the Underdog 240

Srećko Petrović:

Is Nicholai Velimirovich the author of the book
Words to the Serbian People Through the Dungeon Window? 260

Todor Mitrović:

Heights We Live By:
On the Religious Coherence between Space and Cyberspace 304

Đurđina Šijaković Maidanik:

The powerful and disturbing touch: gendered supplication in Euripides' *Hecuba* ... 324

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**The powerful and disturbing touch:
gendered supplication in Euripides' *Hecuba****

Abstract: This paper proposes a reading of two episodes of Hecuba's supplication in Euripides' drama *Hecuba*. I am hoping to show that the female protagonist Hecuba, when begging for mercy, uses the ritual potential of the supplication act, while the two male characters secularize the primarily ritual act, with the result of escaping from it. The dramatized rite of supplication can serve for examination of normative engagements in the sphere of religious issues and gender roles, and the relationship between speech and gesture on stage. I am examining some aspects of the supplication rite and analysing chosen sections of the dramatic text, with the goal of mapping them within the coordinates of ritual/secularized, gestures/words, female/male.

Key words: ἰκετεία (supplication), ritual, Euripides, gender, *Hecuba* (424 BC)

“Which inflection is right? Urgency? Modesty? Culture provides choices, but does not tell suppliants which choice to make. They must communicate an intent to supplicate, and they must do so clearly, but they must do more, even when they must seem to do less.” (Naiden 2007: 62)

One of the prominent situations favoured in the Athenian theatre is the act of ἰκετεία – *supplication*, a ritual act based on the right of the powerless one (*suppliant*) to plead for help and protection with the powerful one (*supplicandus/a*), under certain circumstances and according to certain rules. It is a stylized practice that grasps religious, moral, and legal elements, and it is therefore an extremely fertile ground for the concerns of tragic drama. It is crucial to remember that drama, a far broader category than “literature”, is an official social institution sponsored by the city-state which not only reaffirms, but also questions and debates various ideological norms and overall social *status quo*. Classical Greek dramatic texts are not, of course, historical documents representing reality, but they do reflect life communicating some of the factual social, historical, anthropological, religious, cultural circumstances, adapting the epic narratives to the specific Athenian context. The dramatized rite of supplication can therefore serve for examination of normative engagements in the sphere of religious issues and gender roles, and the relationship between speech and

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gesture on stage. I hope to contribute to such scholarly topic with the reading of Euripides' *Hecuba* presented in this paper.

The most influential study in the scholarship of supplication was the article of John Gould, according to which *ικετεία* is a ritual performed in a certain form bringing success to the suppliant provided that certain rules of the ritual are respected (Gould 1973, 74sqg). If begging according to the rules, the suppliant (powerless one) begs with a certain dose of self-confidence, knowing that s/he is guarded by Zeus Soter, the god of suppliants *par excellence* (cf. Aeschylus, *Supplikes* 359sqg, 641, 478). Also, one can expect that the supplicated (powerful one) will not want to refuse the request. Namely, it is an infamy to refuse a suppliant, and refusal means pulling the ritual impurity onto oneself. The consequence of this „game“ (as Gould names it) is a newly established reciprocally binding relationship between the suppliant and the supplicated. Gould classifies all the supplication rituals in two major groups: „complete“ and „figurative“. As Gould points out, the power and ritual nature of the act rely on physical contact with the parts of body which are regarded to be having peculiar sanctity and vitality – then, a „complete“ act is being established. A „figurative“ act, which lacks the ritual importance and power of the „complete“ one and does not include the physical contact of the two parties, is being performed when nothing more than an intense verbal act is required or when the circumstances do not allow a „complete“ act (Gould 1973, 76–78, 96). There's a whole spectrum of supplication rituals whether the supplicated persona is another human or a divine being, if there is any physical contact between two parties or not, if the suppliant touches a sacred object/place or not (Freyburger 1988, 503). The importance of (present or absent) physical contact has always been underlined; what I would like to put into focus and examine further is the correlation of physical contact and speech in the supplication rite on tragic stage.

This interdependence was generally noticed in the most extensive study of ancient supplication to date, focused on its ethical and quasilegal dimension (Naiden 2006). In this study four steps of supplication procedure are determined: the approach, the gesture, the request (with the arguments), and the decision. The first three steps derive from the suppliant's initiative, and the final, decisive step represents the supplicandus' response. (Naiden 2006, esp. 29–171). Naming the second and the third step as „gestures“ and „words“ respectively, Naiden accurately notices that they are *complementary* signals, i.e. means of communication and expression (Naiden 2006, 43).

„Gestures“ and „words“ have received the most of the scholarly attention. One direction of scholarship on supplication was led by the ritualists; they were focused on several gestures that were held to contain magical power and that guaranteed the suppliant's safety, a phenomenon termed as *Kontaktmagie*. This prevailing view has been developed through years combining approaches of history of religions, anthropology, sociology, and classics by authors such as William Robertson Smith (1846–1894), Arnold Van Gennep (1873–1957), Richard Broxton Onians (1899–1986), Louis Gernet (1882–1962), Karl Meuli (1891–1968), Walter Burkert (1931–2015), and the most influential John Gould (1927–2001). The other direction taken by classicists saw the supplication ritual as a kind of narrative, thus restoring the attention to the arguments of the suppliant and the rhetoric skills.

This view opposed the prevailing one and it went along with the rise of narratology in literary theory, in particular Pierre Bourdieu's (1930–2002) attack on the ritual approach as definitive. The rite of supplication within the context of Greek tragedy has been studied mostly through the lens of the prevailing approach of Gould's school, while the studies that employed the other approach saw supplication acts mainly as idiosyncratic scenes, as tools of dramaturgy and characterization.¹

This paper analyses the dynamics between the gestures and words in the Euripides' tragedy *Hecuba* focused on the gestures of physical contact, with the awareness of the gender roles and supported by the approach of Gould's school – after all, Greek tragedy as deeply rooted in the ritual context is a bottomless pit (e.g. Sourvinou-Inwood 2003). Through this analysis or „reading“ I am hoping to show that the concrete sphere of gestures, i.e. the ritual and corporeal layer of the supplication rite, coincides with the feminine agency on stage (while the more elusive sphere of words and rhetorics corresponds with the male agency).

Since our analysis relies on the presence or absence of physical contact between suppliant and supplicandus, we will briefly look into those gestures that enable touch to happen. First, what Naiden calls “approach” happens: lowering the body and crouching (by sitting or kneeling) and stretching unarmed arms demonstrating harmlessness, humility and inferiority (Gould 1973, 94–5; cf. Cairns 1993, 276) – these signals of bodily language are already announcing the physical contact, they are anticipating it.

Afterwards, the suppliant moves his body to touch the supplicandus: clasp the knees, touching the chin, touching/kissing the hand, touching the feet. These ritual gestures according to Gould's school rely on the principle of contagious magic, i.e. the potency of tactile interaction with those body parts which contain, as it was argued, a particular sanctity and embody *male* physical strength and sexual/reproductive power. Hands, knees and chin/beard are explained as seats of sanctity, strength, generative power, and seed throughout in Onians 1988[1951], listed in the bibliography index; cf. Gould 1973, 77, 96 n. 112. The ritualist explanation is that the vital power thus flows from the supplicated to the suppliant via touch, and/or that these most vital parts are simultaneously most vulnerable, so touching them means a threat (albeit not harmful) and it puts the suppliant in a symbolically aggressive position (Gould 1973, 97). There is another point of view, particularly useful in theatre: these gestures are expressive, rich in content and arresting, they lend urgency to the appeal and oblige a response. Being signs of nonverbal communication, the gestures form a “paralanguage” from which the suppliant can borrow chosen signs (Naiden 2006, 44).

Because of the potency and poignancy of all the verbal and gestural elements, it is no wonder that the supplication act has a prominent place in Greek literature and art. How many ritual elements will the suppliant use and to what extent? That depends on the severity of the situation and the goal of the suppliant, practical circumstances, symbolisms of particular body parts, social and literary reasons (Gould 1973, 77; Naiden 2006, 46–7). Every specific situation means that specific choices are to be made, with their risks and consequences.

¹ The detailed review of both scholarly approaches with bibliographies, their strongpoints and shortcomings is given by Naiden 2006, 8–18.

* * *

The steps of the supplication rite provide for repetition and formality, for structure – but also for variety. If we consider this ratio (especially between gestures and words) in the theatrical context, we will come to conclusion that inside of the structure there is space for manipulation by the tragic poet. Like such poetic interventions in mythical patterns as are particularly favoured by Euripides, the dramatized supplication rite is the occasion for artistic freedom, innovations, and conscious choice of this tragic writer.

The supplication rite was a religious and social institution characteristic of archaic and early classical Greece). By the time of Euripides it was weakening and becoming more and more metaphorical (Gould 1973, 101). Nevertheless, its ritual – corporal and gestural dimension – was still alive enough, as we shall see, to permit reference to it and to draw dramatic potency from it. The aforementioned gestures are quite striking and the established intimate physical contact (which rarely happens publicly and on stage) provides for spectacular moments of emotionally expressive theatre. Not least important, the moment of ritual supplication can elicit a talented actor's exemplary use of his body, i.e. the most accessible and the most valuable stage property (Huston 1992). The study of dramatized supplication with its physical gestures can therefore be a helpful tool in ongoing research on the relation of text to performance (Ubersfeld 1999 [1976], 3–11), particularly in the context of ancient theatre. The performative potential of a polyvalent dramatic text is undeniable, but so is the fact that so many classicists have experienced the plays solely as texts far too often. Therefore, „It would be an interesting experiment, as well as a useful corrective of classicists, (...) to watch an ancient play „with the sound turned off“, so we could direct our full attention to the wordless discourse of the actors' bodies.“ (Griffith 1998, 231).

Moreover, if we are to speak about the „displacement of the body by speech“ which „remains central to tragedy“ (Murnaghan 1988, 29), we cannot do so without considering gender roles. Needless to say, all male and female characters were *embodied* by male actors, and the plays were seen by mostly if not solely male audiences.² Furthermore, the social institution called theatre, whether confirming or debating civic ideology, communicated it together with its gender norms, and the corporeal self in tragedy and its catastrophes were regularly represented through feminine agency. As Froma Zeitlin in her seminal study has shown: “Men too have bodies, of course, but in a system defined by gender the role of representing the corporeal side of life in its helplessness and submission to constraints is primarily assigned to women.” (Zeitlin 1996, 352). This was the same patriarchal civic ideology that reserved the aesthetic ideals of somatic strength and beauty to the male athlete, and that kept the voices of women (and other socially inferior categories) generally muted and hence assimilated to their (weak, flawed) bodies. One sphere of life where women never-

² Were women allowed to attend theatre? This topic was largely discussed. It seems that coming to theatre was not prohibited to them and that Athenian women, female foreigners and female slaves were allowed to come but were rarely actually coming (Podlecki 1990, Henderson 1991, Goldhill 1994). For the contrary opinion, cf. Csapo, Slater 1995: 286, where it is claimed with some certainty that women (and boys) were attending theatre. At any rate, even if there was a limited number of women present in the audience, the plays were primarily addressing male citizens (Gould 1980, 38–39 f. 2; Foley 2001, 1 f. 1).

theless were heard and seen was that of rituals.³ In life (and likewise in theatrical space) through birth, nurture of children, tending to the sick and caring for the deceased, woman seems to be a link particularly to the fragility and mortality of the human body, and to the concrete embodied life experience: the perishable physical being. Therefore, ritual supplication with gestures of physical contact (or their absence) deserves further analysis.

In order to examine how withdrawal of ritual gestures consequently corresponds with a rather secularized, rhetorical and politicized status of supplication, I have chosen two suppliant episodes involving a female character, both from Euripides' drama *Hecuba*, staged for the first and only time in its author's lifetime in 424 BC.

* * *

After losing almost all her family and her freedom in the late Trojan war, Queen Hecuba of Troy, confined in the victors' camp with other enslaved Trojan women, is informed that at the demand of Achilles' ghostly apparition *and at the instance of Odysseus* the Greeks will sacrifice one of her very few children [Note: I would *not* number them; they would be in fact *four*, including grown son Helenus and, besides Polyxena, another daughter Cassandra and the youngest child Polydorus—whom Euripides may have kept alive *pace Iliad* in order to grant Polymestor, not Achilles (who in *Iliad* 20 kills Polydorus son of Priam *and Laothoë*), the dishonor of murdering a son of Priam *and Hecuba* by the same name--unlikely to have been given to two different sons of the late king!] who remain alive out of the eighteen she had born to Priam, her maiden daughter Polyxena. Hecuba supplicates Odysseus and begs for mercy, all in vain. The girl is ritually slain. While her mother is mourning Polyxena, she finds news that her youngest son has also been killed: his dead body is washed up into the nearby beach. Polydorus has been murdered by Thracian king Polymestor, a friend and ally of theirs. Late in the war his parents had entrusted their little boy to this man for safe-keeping and with him much royal treasure. However, that "friend" killed his little guest out of greed for the gold and, he will say, to please the Greeks who will not now have to worry about a future avenger of Priam and Troy. Hecuba now supplicates again. She begs the Greek commander-in-chief Agamemnon to take revenge on the Thracian. All that she receives is his consent to her taking the matter in her own hands. With the help of Trojan women, Hecuba will deprive the Thracian king of his eyesight and his children. Only then she can meet her own destiny.

The core of the play's complex dramatic plot lies in Hecuba's dominant role as sufferer. Her suffering unites the two stories of Polydorus and Polyxena and is a focal point toward which all Troy's misfortunes are concentrated. The play is masterfully structured so that it leads to, and then from, each acme moment of her pain. Thinking that it is Polyxena's body, newly washed in seawater, buried to her beneath a shroud Hecuba uncovers it only to discover Polydorus' corpse. Unlike Homer's Hecuba who is static, passive, pathetic, and rarely in the foreground, Euripides' Hecuba turns out to be an active and dominant character in *Hecuba*, as she will be in *Troades* and probably in the lost *Alexan-*

³ On the role of women in Greek religion, see Winkler 1990[1972], 188–209, Osborne 1993, Blundell, Williamson 1998, Dillon 2001, Goff 2004.

der as well.⁴ The old woman, helpless at the beginning of this play, will show herself to be a dreadful avenger.⁵ Prior to this, however, the ex-queen will have to supplicate Greek enemies twice but with negative outcome: she begs Odysseus to spare her daughter, Agamemnon to punish her son's murderer.

Hecuba's supplicates Odysseus (vv. 251–295)

In her first plea, directed towards Greek hero Odysseus, Hecuba skilfully and confidently argues the justice of her request. For once during the Trojan War Odysseus, pretending to be a blind beggar, had purposely fallen into Trojan hands in order to spy on the Trojans. However, Hecuba recognized archenemy Odysseus. His true identity detected, he urgently and effectively supplicated Hecuba. Consciously, conscientiously respecting the hallowed rules of supplication he concealed him and saved his life. She acted in accordance with the gods' law. For this reason she believes that she has acquired a right to reciprocal favor.⁶ Back to the present moment in the play: Hecuba's suppliant plea for Polyxena's life to be spared is actually a request for returning a favor already done (vv. 273–278 with my translation):

ἦψω τῆς ἐμῆς, ὡς φῆς, χερὸς
καὶ τῆσδε γραΐας προσπίτνων παρηίδος:
ἀνθάπτουμαι σου τῶνδε τῶν αὐτῶν ἐγὼ
χάριν τ' ἀπαιτῶ τήν τόθ' ἵκετεύω τέ σε,
μὴ μου τὸ τέκνον ἐκ χερῶν ἀποσπάσης,
μηδὲ κτάνητε: τῶν τεθνηκότων ἄλλις.

Once you fell at my feet, as you yourself say,
grasped my hand and my elderly cheek.
Now, it is me clutching you, asking a favor
in return for the one then. I supplicate you:
do not you wrest my child away from my arms
nor, all of you, kill her: those dead are enough.

These lines are all about physical contact. Be it between the former suppliant Odysseus and the queen in the past, between mother and daughter with him in the present moment (cf. vv. 338, 409sq, 424), or the daughter and her captors in the nearest future – the intense, intimate and compelling touch is the pivotal sensation. The central point of this section is ἀνθάπτουμαι σου (v. 275) | “I am laying hold of you in return”, stressing the dimension of physical contact in the reciprocity between two parties that is established in a successful ritual supplication. But where Hecuba through this spectacular action resumes a dialogue that began long ago by like physical contact, Odysseus finds a way, as we shall see, against and avoiding further touch.

4 For Homer's *Hecuba* v. *Iliad* 6.251–311, 22.79–92, 24.193–227, 283–301, 747–60. Hence, I disagree with Justina Gregory who claims that for building the character of Hecuba as fierce and decisive motherly figure Euripides found source in *Iliad* (Gregory 2005, xviii).

5 We cannot pinpoint precisely when this alteration of Hecuba is complete. It is a general opinion that Hecuba transforms herself from passive victim to an active executor of revenge punishing Polymestor. However, Hecuba is active all along, whichever child of hers is the matter, whether trying to prevent Polyxena's death, or trying to exact revenge for the murder of Polydorus (Kovacs 1987, 99).

6 Plea for χάρις | “a favor in return” is an utterly personal appeal (v. 830); it is about trading favors, „quid pro quo“. In colloquial language, the term χάρις could be well understood from the expression χάρις χάριν τίκτει, „I'll scratch your back, you'll scratch mine“. Furthermore, when it comes to Hecuba's plea, gods were believed to be pleased when the rights of the weak ones are taken care of, and such a weak one would be a prisoner of war that is also a blind pauper – precisely what Odysseus back then counted on.

Hecuba also tells Odysseus: ἐλθὼν δ' εἰς Ἀχαιικὸν στρατὸν παρηγόρησον | „Go to the Achaean army and appease them“ (vv. 287sq). The chosen verb παρηγορέω | „advise“, „soothe“, „comfort“, is developed from the word ἀγορά. Ἀγορά, „assembly“, „market“ is the public space within which men assemble to carry out all manly business: to sell and buy, to negotiate and come to agreements, to discuss, give speeches, even vote – in short, to use their rhetorical skills for various ends. In *Hecuba*, the function of ἀγορά is served by an *open field* at which the Greeks gather and act (deliver speeches, debate, persuade, vote, decide, sacrifice). On this open field there is no place for Trojans, especially Trojan *women* (who act in the *indoor space*, an *enclosing text* which men can enter but where they are not welcome and might be harmed).

Touching Odysseus' hand cheek, and beard (vv. 273–6, 286) and thereby activating the full potential of contagious magic in ritual supplication, Hecuba completes her plea with these words (vv. 293–5 with my translation):

<p>τὸ δ' ἀξίωμα, κἄν κακῶς λέγῃ, τὸ σὸν πείσει: λόγος γὰρ ἔκ τ' ἀδοξούντων ἰῶν κάκ τῶν δοκούντων αὐτὸς οὐ ταῦτ' ὀσθένει</p>	<p>Your rank, even if words are meagre, will persuade: for the same argument by ones of ill repute does not have the same persuasive power as when used by ones held in high esteem.</p>
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These lines, built up around the word λόγος | „argument“, form a fitting introduction to Odysseus' response. Let us recall the spectrum of epithets that characterize Odysseus. He is capable, cunning, skilful, clever, adroit; but if we are to be frank, he is also devious, guileful, and mendacious. It is obvious why many regard him as a gifted politician! In sum, he will most certainly win a debate. Maybe the most suitable epithet of Odysseus is the one that frequently completes his naming: πολύτροπος | „one with many turns“, „very resourceful“. Naturally, a man with such a quality comes up with an „exit“, i.e. a well-argued denial of what Hecuba rightfully demands. For he replies to Hecuba that he is willing to spare *her* life in return for the old favor. Therefore, they will be even. Moreover, he claims, it is not just or righteous to disrespect the deceased by ignoring their desires, the deceased one in this case being Achilles, whose ghost demands Polyxena's life. Odysseus concludes that Greeks have superior attitudes, customs, and deeds—in broadest terms, Greek „politics“ (vv. 330sq), in contrast to the ways of barbarians who do not pay respect to either their living or their dead. His specious yet offensive response exemplifies his cynical manipulation of the principal institutions of rational, „civilized“ male Greeks, as opposed to the barbarian women who stand for the sphere of „primitive“ laws, of rituals and magic.

Let's have a closer look at both participants in this *agōn*. On one side there is an aged woman from the royal Trojan family, i.e. a member of the aristocracy with lifelong experience in and knowledge of rituals, protocol, and diplomacy, of war, of life and death. On the other side there is Greek hero Odysseus, portrayed in this play as an arrant demagogue whose success relies on the shortcomings of the masses. This is not to say that Odysseus is not objectively smart, eloquent, and charismatic; however, all these qualities imply an audience such as he can influence.⁷ Hecuba is hoping that the crisis can be resolved on the level

⁷ On Odysseus' manipulation of Greek soldiers by means of „patriotic conventions“ in *Hecuba*, v. Synodinou 1994, where an analysis of the *agon* between Hecuba and Odysseus and an extensive survey of Odysseus'

of personal reciprocal favor (*χάρις*) and invites Odysseus to do what he does naturally: to make a decisive impact on public opinion. However, the current disproportion of political power between them is such that Odysseus can afford to choose not to do/to return Hecuba a real favor, and to displace the whole thing onto a political level. It is nothing personal!

Helen Foley observes that in spite of Odysseus' problematic character Hecuba cannot refute his defence of *public* interest by pleading *private* reasons, however valid, for returning a favor and upholding a personal justice (Foley 2001, 284). On the level of politics, the *agōn* of Odysseus and Hecuba represents confrontation of democracy and aristocracy, where Hecuba, even if she seems narrow⁸ in her aristocratic manner of arguing for her personal interest against the public one, builds her case upon principles that are, she asserts, „universal to a stable social and religious order and political equality“ (Foley 2001, 285). With this last claim in mind, we cannot say that Hecuba's very personal plea is solely personal, can we?

The enslaved Trojan queen, who doesn't belong to the common people by birth or marriage, is aware of the huge gap between ruling royalty and *δημος* (cf. v. 293–295 above), even as Odysseus is. She is also aware of the power of *λόγος* over pliable “plebeians” in the association of Greek males in general, in this case that of the Greek army. If we could say that Hecuba learned to supplicate from a “civilized” male Greek just like another murderous barbarian woman Medea (Castellani 2012, 97), we could also say that the same barbarian(s) used the means of *λόγος* to play by Greek rules. Being an aged, enslaved and wretched mother, her domain and resource should well be the ritual sphere and the gestures of physical contact ought to provide her with protection. However, enactment of a rite is so inadequate in this devastating scene that Hecuba has to look for another tool: verbal manoeuvre. She grasps the foot, hand, and beard of Odysseus, the last of these being the site of his mature masculinity and symbolic site of power. However, he proved to be not strong (if strength is obliged to honour the weak), but arrogant, abusing his position to actually humiliate her. Her persuasive argument derives from obvious factors, her characterization and the playwright's dramaturg; but it emerges furthermore from circumstances in which bodily gestures and ritually and emotionally charged physical contact mean little.

Odysseus chooses to keep their interaction on the level of politics and to act according to the principle of democracy, i.e. in line with the decision of majority in the Assembly. This choice entails another one: the choice to disregard the ritual that Hecuba activates. Not only does the tragic poet deliberately indicate that Odysseus manipulated a divided Assembly. The account of Hecuba's reception of humbled, vulnerable Odysseus during the Trojan war is most probably Euripides' mythic innovation, as one scholium suggests.⁹ By

character are given together with many pertinent references. This author belongs to the group of critics who discern that Odysseus got soldiers in Assembly to vote for the sacrifice of Polyxena by rhetorical manipulation, and that he draws on this power during debate with Hecuba. When describing Odysseus' decisive role in convincing the soldiers, the enslaved Trojan women apply the following epithets: *ποικιλόφρων*, *κόπις*, *ἡδυλόγος*, *δημοχαριστής* (v. 131sq), which are consonant with Odysseus' traditional characterization as well as that of the demagogues in the Athenian Assembly of that time (Synodinou 1994, 194; Michelini 1987, 143).

⁸ On Hecuba's aristocratic approach, v. Kovacs 1987, 80–83 and 98sq.

⁹ Schwartz 1887, 32 ad 2.41: ἀπίθανον τὸ πλάσμα καὶ οὐχ Ὀμηρικόν· οὐ γὰρ ἂν ἐσίγασεν Ἑκάβη πολέμιον θεασαμένη κατοπτρεύοντα τὰ κατὰ τοὺς Τρώας πράγματα, ἢ δὲ Ἑλένη εἰκότως-ἄτην γὰρ μετέστενεν Ἀφροδίτης.

means of such invention the poet makes Odysseus personally repellent and increases empathy for the old woman's calamity. Finding himself in his present position of superiority, Odysseus abuses it and ignores the fact that, with regard to supplication, a position of power does not merely make him „powerful“, it also obliges him. A position of power should also be a position of responsibility. Not, however, for him, now.

Hecuba therefore urges her daughter to supplicate Odysseus herself by clasping his knees (v. 339). Her calculation is astute. Through this new act of supplication a new ritual cycle would be activated, a new relationship established to which Odysseus would need to respond. However, Polyxena notices how Odysseus avoids contact with her, hides his right hand and turns his beard away (vv. 342–44). Evidently, he *is* conscious of the ritual power of supplication that physical contact activates. Indeed, he is actually disturbed by the very thought of this and thus tries to keep the situation in the intangible domain of words and discussion. He tries to *displace* the topic into that domain from its original, ritual and physical context. Where abstracting and reducing life to words and ideas dominates, there he „has many ways“. Polyxena chooses not to beg, thereby choosing death, and explicitly sets Odysseus free from his duty towards her in the case of supplication.¹⁰ According to Polyxena, to supplicate, to implore is a humiliation which she refuses to endure (cf. vv. 342sq, 405sq). A mother about to lose yet another child cannot afford that attitude: that is why Hecuba, on the contrary, calls her supplication an act of *courage* (τολμᾶν ἀνάγκη, v. 751), not without paradox and dramatic impact.

Hecuba supplicates Agamemnon (vv. 752–888)

Shortly afterwards Hecuba discovers that her last-born son Polydorus is dead, murdered at the hand of that treacherous barbarian “ally”, Thracian king Polymestor. In consequence enslaved Hecuba supplicates her master Agamemnon, the supreme Greek commander. A general and conqueror of her nation, a *man* and her owner, Agamemnon is a superior figure *par excellence*. Just as in the previous case with Odysseus, Hecuba the suppliant righteously expects Agamemnon to accept her ritual plea, on two principles. First, she believes that he is obliged to stand in defence of a universal and paramount concept of customary law, *ξενία* or “guest-friendship”. The Thracian king violated and profaned this rule, as he took in a child entrusted to him and murdered him.¹¹ Second, Hecuba also tries to bind

Cf. Homer, *Odyssey* 4.242sq, where Hecuba does not appear nor does Odysseus pretend to be blind, and where he is recognized only by infamous beautiful Helen. On Odysseus' ungratefulness towards Hecuba, v. Synodinou 1994, pastutr. 6.

¹⁰ Polyxena's attitude transforms the atrocity of murdering a slave into a highly affecting spectacle of human strength, dignity, and above all free will. *Sophoclean* Polyxena (Conacher 1961, 19) does not accept being the victim of an external force, but instead maintains her free will even though facing an imposed death. Not only is she free, but she, the captive, sets free the captor, free from his fear that he will be coerced to help her should she invoke Zeus Soter her supplication (v. 345). This act of expressly forgoing the right to supplicate, when this right belongs to her and she is expected to use it, indeed told to do so by her mother, is a masterful *coup de théâtre*. On the concepts of freedom and slavery in *Hecuba*, v. Daitz 1971.

¹¹ Both *ἱκετεία* and *ξενία* as ancient ritual practices form an unbreakable bond comparable to blood relationship, not only between the two individuals who establish it, but also between their collaterals and progeny.

Agamemnon to take revenge for Polydorus' death as his kin, since the Greek warlord chose Polydorus' sister Cassandra for his slave concubine. This second, quite personal appeal is a request for a reciprocal favor, *χάρις* (v. 830).¹²

Accordingly, Hecuba, whose case customary law supports, activates the ritual potential of supplication: she touches Agamemnon's knees, beard, and right hand (vv. 752sq, 787). Complementing her gestural plea with words, Hecuba appeals to *Nomos* personified, a divine Law that exists „since the beginning of time“, and imposes a duty to punish the wicked (vv. 798–801 with my translation):

<p>ἡμεῖς μὲν οὖν δοῦλοί τε κάσθηνεῖς ἴσως: ἀλλ' οἱ θεοὶ σθένουσι χά κείνων κρατῶν Νόμος: νόμῳ γὰρ τοὺς θεοὺς ἠγοούμεθα καὶ ζῶμεν ἄδικα καὶ δίκαι' ὠρισμένοι:</p>	<p>I might be a powerless slave, but gods are almighty and over them the divine Law rules. It is by this law that we believe in them by discerning right and wrong we live.</p>
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If we don't abide by this principle, Hecuba says further on, there's no justice. Hecuba deploys the ritual potency of supplication and calls for *Nomos*, a principle that needs no argument and no rhetoric, that divine Law which is eternal and universal, unlike ephemeral and local regulations codified by mortals (*νόμοι*).¹³

Unfortunately for her, Agamemnon tries to prevent or curtail physical contact with his suppliant, as we learn from the stage direction implied by verse 812. For he is well aware of supplication's ritual power and the duties that *ικετεῖα* would impose on him.

As Odysseus has done earlier, Agamemnon closes himself off from the realm of direct and transparent life experience, and hastens into that of politics, diplomacy, negotiation, that is, where life experience is *mediated and rationalized*. Agamemnon says he agrees with Hecuba and would gladly punish the villain,¹⁴ but he fears that this could be misunderstood among his soldiers as favoritism, demonstrating weakness, a selfish desire to

¹² Nusbaum 2001[1986], 414, 416 claims that Hecuba uses her daughter's body and her own as mere tools for her vengeful plan. It seems to me that in this and her subsequent remarks about Hecuba's doggishness this scholar's ethical analysis does not take into consideration the tragedy's socio-religious dimension as regards supplication, guest-friendship, and reciprocated favors nor the function of the physical person in this domain. Conacher is particularly sharp and, dare I say malicious, calling Hecuba her daughter's pimp (Conacher 1961, 22–23). In contrast, Gregory defends Hecuba, pointing out that in the realm of tragedy parents freely talk about their children's sexuality and that Hecuba's dubious definition of Cassandra's status (as if were a marriage, and not a slavery) is not a solitary case (Gregory 1991, 106–107).

¹³ The term *νόμος* relates to the wide spectrum of normative concepts, from customary and habitual to law decrees. This term should not be limited to guidelines of human arbitration only, as is suggested by Heraclitus' remark on the difference between human *νόμοι* and one divine *νόμος* (Heraclitus, *On Nature* B114). On notorious sophistic antithesis *nomos* : *phusis* within Greek tragedy, v. Lanzillotta 2013, 894–896.

On Hecuba's appeal to divine Law (*Νόμος*) and the human art of persuasion (*Πειθώ*), pp. Odysseus' and Agamemnon's attitude towards *Νόμος*, v. Kirkwood 1947. Kirkwood deems *Νόμος* the very thread that unifies *Hecuba*, a view rejected by numerous scholars. Hecuba's attitude to *Νόμος* and the proposed understanding of this term when used in Hecuba's lines 798–805 constitute one of the strongpoints of the philosophical interpretation of Martha Nusbaum (Nusbaum 2001[1986], 397–422), who defines the afore-mentioned Hecuba's attitude as ethical anthropocentrism.

¹⁴ Agamemnon condemns Polymestor's cruelty and greediness without hesitation (v. 775) and he feels sorry for Hecuba (v. 783, 785, 850), sincerely sorrowful; but that's as far as he is willing to go.

please Cassandra and her mother—both Trojans, both *enemy*. (Barbarous Polymestor, on the other hand, is *not* an enemy at all under the present circumstances, but even, albeit perversely, may be perceived a *friend*.) On these realities Hecuba can have only one, desolate comment (vv. 83–867 with my translation):

φεῦ. οὐκ ἔστι θνητῶν ὅστις ἔστ' ἐλεύθερος;	Alas. No mortal is free.
ἢ χρημάτων γὰρ δοῦλός ἐστιν ἢ τύχης,	He's a slave either to money or fate,
ἢ πλῆθος αὐτὸν πόλεος ἢ νόμων γραφαὶ	either the majority or the public prosecutions
εἴργουσι χρῆσθαι μὴ κατὰ γνώμην τρόποις.	keep him away from acting on conscience.

Mercier offers an analysis of the text according to which Hecuba performs „prolonged“ supplication: announcing it already at vv. 737sq, falling to her knees the latest at vv. 752sq (when she starts using the language characteristic for supplication), and is surely on her knees until vv. 888.¹⁵ Such long kneeling of an old woman who clings to the king's legs while he is trying to shake her off can have been extremely disagreeable stage business for the two actors involved, for other actors (i.e. internal spectators), and especially for the audience (Mercier 1993, 158). This second supplication scene is more startling than the first one, because clasping the supplicandus' knees, in comparison with falling at his feet, is intense contact with so much more proximity and intimacy.

After her futile yet highly dramatic appeal, Hecuba releases Agamemnon from her suppliant grasp, and dismisses his fear of consequences of neglected duty (vv. 868sq). Paradoxically, and again with huge dramatic charge, the slave liberates the master.

Agamemnon has refused to execute the revenge himself. Instead he merely gives his permission to Hecuba. He will turn a blind eye till she carries out her plan, and promises to arbitrate in her favor at a later pseudo-trial. How grimly playful language can be: by *turning a blind eye* Agamemnon enables Hecuba to make Polymestor *blind*. Greek king and barbarian king actually share a moral blindness (Segal 1990, 129). Fundamental customary regulations are conspicuously violated; the *polis* and its institutions are far away and effective legal intervention is absent, while men in power, the Greek high command, have disowned moral authority because with it comes obligation to act in certain way. They retain power but close their eyes to the responsibilities that come with it. Under these conditions of manifold social inversion a Dionysiac reversal occurs, typical for Euripidean theatre. The time has come for women to conceive a plot, and take matters into their own hands – literally.¹⁶ After physical contact and its ritual potency the denied by Odysseus

¹⁵ Although the spectacle of prolonged supplication with kneeling is characteristic of Euripidean theatre, this Hecuba's act lasts for more than 130 lines according to Mercier's analysis, which is exceptionally long and comparable only to the 144 lines-long Andromache's kneeling in front of Peleus in *Andromache*.

¹⁶ Let it be briefly mentioned that one direction of this play's analysis asserts that from the perspective of Athenian criminal law some kind of retribution is not only Hecuba's right but also her duty towards both the murdered son and society. In fact, Euripides purposely left few signs, if any, to invite interpreting the vindictive act of Trojan women in the context of judicial law. V. MacDowell 1963:1; Tulin 1996. Within the framework of interpreting the revenge as a legally authorized reaction to a crime, we can „read“ in the play that Hecuba does not explicitly with her own hands either murder Polymestor's children (vv. 1161sq) or blind him (vv. 1167–71). This is in accordance with the Athenian law that explicitly prohibits handing a killer over to the family of the victim (Meridor 1978: 30).

and minimized by Agamemnon, an unavoidable, irrefutable *touch* will be fully discharged on the culprit Polymnestor. Trojan *female hands* will see to their version of justice which is “blind” in a completely different sense, as impartial and objective. After Hecuba has lured the greedy, wicked Thracian into the female space of the captive women’s quarters, they kill his children. After he has seen this they blind his eyes. The wretched Polymnestor is messenger who narrates his own catastrophe, giving us a picture, the last *he* ill ever see, of unparalleled female violence (vv. 1145sq). Female hands, all over his body, almost multiply into countless spots of relentless touch, seizing his male hands and feet, not *now* in a female suppliant mode. Their Erinyes-like action of retribution accords with female chthonic powers, with natural laws of Mother Earth that antedate *polis*, the patriarchal system, the Olympic gods, and the reign of *logos*. This is where Euripides, the alleged rationalist from the sceptical era of the Peloponnesian War, enters the world of rituals as deeply as he ever does: „Thus we see that blessing as well as cursing lies in the power of the Chthonian people, the dead, the Erinyes, and collectively of Mother Earth. (...) The law that ‘The doer shall suffer’ is a natural law like the maturing of a seed, or the return of spring; (...) The law of the Erinyes neither understands nor forgives. It simply operates.“ (Murray 1925: vii, ix).

The abhorrent, extremely harsh punishment of Polymnestor serves not just as escalated cruel retribution for a single cruel crime, but also as a cumulative response to the male behavior that ignoring corporal touch, ritual acts, and *Nomos*. The phallogocentric veneer is not rooted firmly, and it collapses. Greek leaders and Polymnestor alike slip away from the directness of life into demagogy, escape from the zone of ritual supplication into politicized calculation. Trojan women dispense them from selfishly conceived duty and themselves act instead, now not clasping knees but with a malevolent, violent, bloody physicality.¹⁷

* * *

Both cases of Hecuba’s rejected and failed supplication point out the gap between two ethical modes that belong to different areas of life, to different sexes.

17 This immediacy that I argue is, believe, very well evoked in the baroque painting *Hecuba Blinding Polym(n)estor* by Giuseppe Maria Crespi (oil on canvas, Bologna circa 1700, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique). The painting, characterized by monumentality and dramatic effect along with excellent painting technique, shows Polymnestor being held by one of the Trojan women while Hecuba attacks his face to blind him. The image emerges from the darkness of its background with the effect of expressive precision, pioneered in the later works of Titian and Caravaggio. The dynamics of the movements of the two protagonists and the somatic dimension of their relation are underlined by the motion of their clothing. Polymnestor is losing his balance. We see him losing control in the flailing free arm and a foot in the air. The avenger stands firmly with both feet on the ground and acts with elegant accuracy of a determined and calm assault. (Let us also notice that in this baroque visual representation Hecuba is a vigorous woman and not an old lady as in the ancient prototype, and that she performs the blinding explicitly herself, which is not the case in Euripides’ drama, cf. f. 16. Polymnestor’s sons are not to be seen, which keeps this baroque representation of Hecuba’s retribution far from its full ferocity. Not only that the aforementioned directness exists between Hecuba and Polymnestor. The onlooker stands directly in the scene as well. Considering the position that the painter chose for Hecuba’s figure--facing away from us towards the depth of the image and her victim, thus anticipating the body position of observers who approach the painting from its right--could each observer identify with the wrathful mother to some extent, as with co-executor of a just retribution?

Childbearing and nurture of children, a central role in funeral rites and in wide range of cult practices all belong to the domain of the female. Those activities indicate care for the bonds between past and present, present and future, and belong to the arena of universal and concrete facts of life. Therefore, they relate to a bigger and a deeper picture in contrast to male civic activities and current, ephemeral issues of *agora*, however grave and acute they can be, the subject of public politics discussed in the Assembly.

An offence in the area of personal yet also universal facts of life involves violation of rules that can be described as timeless, common to all humankind, unwritten customary law.

Those norms and rules to which Hecuba appeals, and to violation of which Trojan women respond literally ‘with a vengeance’, belong to this unwritten law: the rights of the deceased, of surrendered prisoners of war, and of slaves; suppliants’ rights, a code of reciprocated favors and of guest-friendship. Appealing to such norms as are founded in divine *Nomos*, aged and enslaved Hecuba invokes the potency of ritual supplication. Those to whom she appeals – resourceful hero Odysseus and supreme commander Agamemnon, the two leaders of the victorious Greek army, step back from the gestures of ritual supplication, avoid physical contact, and in return they transform the ritual into a secularized, rhetoricized, politicized form of mere request, and so they succeed in deflecting moral responsibility and thus evade it.

Being witness to this, powerless Hecuba, not yet empowered, speaks of her sorrows, yearning to amplify the ritual potency of her pleas. In fact, she is on her painful way to empowerment. It as if Euripides places corporeality under a magnifying glass: While some scholars have seen the image in the utterance quoted below as a grotesque degradation that corresponds to Hecuba’s moral fall (Micheline 1987, 152–153; Nusbaum 1986, 415), I would like to turn attention in another direction: the dramatic and magic potency of the ritual suppliant gestures.

There is a unique moment in the play where words complement the performative reality of the script, with graphic imagination: as if each *part* of Hecuba’s body could present its own supplicating plea. Even though this can hardly be staged, the *image* of diverse parts of her body supplicating, each on its own account and thus speaking for itself in bodily “paralanguage” must not pass unperceived in the mind’s eye and ear. „The first prerequisite for the semiotic use of the body (...) is an ability to see it as *Ding an sich*, (...) divorced from the person who inhabits it.“ (Griffith 1998, 232). Hecuba wishes that parts of her, as numerous as locks of hair on her head, might each find a voice in a massive tearful chorus stark, vivid, and palpable (vv. 836–840 with my translation):

<p>εἴ μοι γένοιτο φθόγγος ἐν βραχίῃσι καὶ χερσὶ καὶ κόμαισι καὶ ποδῶν βάσει ἢ Δαιδάλου τέχνασιν ἢ θεῶν τινος, ὡς πάνθ’ ὀμαρτῆ σῶν ἔχοντο γουνάτων κλαίοντ’, ἐπισκῆπτοντα παντοῖους λόγους.</p>	<p>If only I had voice in arms and palms, in hairs and legs, placed there by skilled Daedalus or some god, so that all my cells wrapped around your knees shed tears begging in countless ways.</p>
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The mythical craftsman Daedalus was known to possess not only manual skill but also wisdom. The artist who created lifelike figures of divinities (*δαίδαλα*) that could move and speak, he knew how powerful the touch of hand is, and that it possesses magic that can even impart breath and movement to a sculptor’s material. Hecuba wishes to be Daedalus’ living

statue, a manifestation that is visible and will thereby confirm rights that, to this point, she been asserting to no effect. The grieving, angry mother wishes to have a plural body that multiplies ritual potency and the magic of physical contact by each of its countless cells, to compensate for the absence of her children whom she cannot save or ever again *touch*.

Conclusion

This paper aspires to direct attention of thoughtful readers to a striking but underappreciated feature of Euripides' dramaturgy that in this respect as in others reflects his analysis of Greek society, mythical and contemporary. It may guide in particular all who make an effort to visualize tragedies, who have the good fortune to see their careful cinematic realization or, better yet, to attend live performances of the plays.

Its findings are clear. A thorough case study of Euripides' *Hecuba* reveals a striking difference between attitudes toward *ἱκετεία*, "supplication" on the part of male characters (Odysseus and Agamemnon) and of female ones (Clytemnestra and Polyxena). That is, toward a venerable institution and practice: ritualized appeal for help, particularly for a suppliant's protection from grave harm. In this troubling play's dialogue, which we read (and in imagination hear, embarrassed silences included), and in stage business, which we may confidently visualize, *Hecuba* dramatizes an essential gendered antithesis. The pairs of male characters and female ones, despite stark contrasts between the two unheroic Greek "heroes" and between royal Trojan mother and daughter, show very different understandings, male versus female, of supplication and of a suppliant. The males, on the one hand, regard supplication as an instrument, like a sword that can stab or, in another's hand, can be parried. It is a social-political construction and man-made—literally *man-made*. As such it is subject to negotiation and qualification. It deploys words and bodily gestures that may be taken up, put aside, even dismissed. When a male supplicates, he "goes through the motions," making tongue, arms, kneeling legs his means to an end: his survival. When a woman does so, on the other hand, her voice and her body are her self, each limb and organ allied with a self which she strives to defend or which she risks for a beloved other's survival. *Her* supplication belongs to a non-negotiable ritual sphere and has, or should have, absolute universal force, an invisible, magical one such as another mortal ignores or quibbles about only at great peril. The source of that force is *Zeus*.

Supplication is a favorite theme of this poet-playwright. Suppliant language and associated ritual bodily gesture, whether merely mentioned for compelling metaphor or, often, enacted in rare yet sometimes extended moments of interpersonal physical contact, occur in over half of Euripides' surviving plays (and in lost but well known *Telephus* as well as in two lost *Alcmaeon* tragedies among others). Scholars and students might well look again at suppliant scenes of plays that precede *Hecuba* (besides *Telephus*, *Children of Heracles*, and *Medea*), of others from about the same period in the aging playwright's career (*Hippolytus II*, *Andromache*, *Suppliants*, *Ion*), of those from his old age *Iphigenia Among the Taurians*, *Trojan Women*, *Helen*, *Heracles*, *Phoenician Women*, *Orestes*), even of posthumous *Iphigenia at Aulis*. His relatively few instances of supplicating males particularly invite study under this new light, as well as the even fewer places where females are *supplicandae*.

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