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Melting as a Metaphor of Embodied Emotions in Homer and Euripides*

ABSTRACT: Metaphors of melting (τήκειν) applied to human beings or parts of their bodies have a long and complex history in ancient Greek literature. This paper focuses on Homer and Euripides and examines how metaphors of melting are or can be used to describe embodied emotions, thus forming 'primary' or 'correlation' metaphors according to Conceptual Metaphor Theory. In Homer, the most common target of melting metaphors is weeping, but we also find cases where the association with bodily experience remains more open. Euripides sometimes constructs more daring melting metaphors, especially cases referring to abstracta or the soul. Even in these cases, however, the context mostly suggests an association with embodied emotions; when the tragedies were performed, this bodily dimension could even be visible on stage. Overall, while Homer's and Euripides' melting metaphors differ due to literary factors and evolving anthropological concepts, they share a strong interest in emotion as bodily experience.

KEYWORDS: Homer, Euripides, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, embodied emotions, melting.

Metaphors of melting applied to human beings or parts of their bodies have a long and complex history in ancient Greek literature¹. The earliest instances, often associated with weeping, are found in Homer. Early lyric poets, beginning with Alcman, apply the idea of melting to erotic contexts, a use that is later imitated and developed in Hellenistic poetry. The classical tragedians, on the other hand, use melting metaphors for a wide range of emotionally charged situations. Around the same time, medical writers begin to use the same terms to describe physiological processes in the human body, while Plato mixes lyric and medical uses in a philosophical context². This paper explores how metaphors of melting, understood in the sense of Conceptual Metaphor

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¹ To my knowledge, there is no comprehensive study of melting metaphors in Greek literature. Arnould 1986 discusses Homer and tragedy, but does not focus on embodied emotions; on melting in lyric, see also Cyrino 1995 (index s.v. τήκω/κατατήκω), on lyric and Plato, Kuhn-Treichel 2024a, pp. 14-21 and 2024b, pp. 22-24.

² Some examples not discussed in this paper: Alcman. *PMGF* 3.61; Pi. fr. 123.11 M.; Hp. *Aēr.* 7;

Theory (CMT), are or can be used to describe embodied emotions³. In order to limit my material, I will focus on expressions with *τήκειν* or its compounds and concentrate on two groups of texts that use these verbs very prominently: the Homeric epics, where we find the earliest attested cases, and the tragedies of Euripides, who uses this metaphor far more frequently than the other tragic poets (we find few cases in Sophocles, which I will briefly consider at the end of this article, none in Aeschylus).

What makes this question so intriguing is the very metaphorical nature of this expression. The concept of melting is obviously transferred from another conceptual domain, namely that of solid objects (snow, ice, wax) turning into a liquid. This makes expressions with *τήκειν* applied to the human body more conspicuously metaphorical than, for example, those with *λύειν*, another notion of dissolution that occurs in both Homer and Euripides. When the knees or the limbs are ‘loosened’, this is a relatively straightforward description for a loss of tension in the muscles that hold the limbs together; but what does it mean when a person or her heart ‘melts’? What makes the situation so complex is that, as a physical process, melting involves different aspects, including heat, loss of shape and the emergence of a liquid. Each of these aspects can be mapped onto bodily experiences: a rise in body temperature, a loss of muscle tension and tears or sweat, all of which are often related with emotions.

From the perspective of CMT, then, melting seems to be a ‘primary’ or ‘correlation’ metaphor, i.e. one based on a correlation with sensorimotor experience⁴. As such, it can also refer to embodied emotions associated with the physical states mentioned. Some of the relevant sensorimotor experiences may be felt only by the character in question, but many of them are likely to be perceptible to an external observer, be it through blushing, a drooping posture or tears, thus giving an intersubjective quality to the experience of embodied emotions⁵. This can also apply to spectators of a tragedy or recipients of a narrative who imagine a given situation. Taking up a term suggested by Marco Caracciolo for narrative texts, one could perhaps speak of ‘phenomenological metaphors’, i.e. ‘metaphors that are meant to convey the phenomenology of

Nat. hom. 12; *Nat. puer.* 33; *Aff.* 24; *Pl. Phdr.* 251b3; *Theoc.* 1.66, 82, 87, 90; 2.28; *A.R.* 3.1020; *AP* 5.210.2; 7.31.1.

³ CMT was developed by Lakoff and Johnson 1980; for an up-to-date version of this theory, see Kövecses 2020. CMT has been successfully applied to texts such as the Homeric epics, see e.g. Horn 2018; Zanker 2019.

⁴ For these terms, see Lakoff-Johnson 1999; Kövecses 2020, pp. 34-35.

⁵ For the intersubjective quality of emotions more generally, see e.g. Cairns and Virág 2024, pp. 10-14.

a character's experience' – an experience that, in the case of expressions with τήκειν and its compounds, may include a strong bodily component⁶.

But are these bodily implications actually relevant to our texts, or more precisely, do the passages in question encourage the readers to associate the metaphor with bodily experiences, and if so, which ones? This is often a tricky question, because metaphors are usually open to a certain range of interpretations and the context does not always give clear indications for a disambiguation. Moreover, Euripides sometimes uses metaphors of melting in ways that are associated with emotions but not explicitly with the body, referring to abstracta or the soul. On the following pages, I will analyse Homeric and Euripidean metaphors of melting with a focus on how they support an association with embodied emotions. I will argue that while Euripides' metaphors of melting are less closely connected with the body than their Homeric counterparts, their context often suggests that they can still stand for embodied emotions, making the distance to Homer less than the linguistic differences suggest.

From tears to heart: metaphors of melting in Homer

The verb τήκειν (in the active: 'melt [an object]'; in the mediopassive: 'melt [oneself]') is attested seven times in the Homeric epics; in addition, there are three instances of κατατήκειν. Remarkably, all but one of the occurrences are found in the *Odyssey*, and even more remarkably, all of them are used in a figurative sense or a figurative context (one simile uses melting both in the tenor and the vehicle)⁷. The most common target domain onto which the concept of melting is mapped is weeping, so that we can speak of a conceptual metaphor *WEeping IS MELTING*. In the *Iliad*, a rueful Helen declares that she should have rather died than coming to Troy and therefore has 'melted with weeping' (κλαίουσα τέτηκα, *Il.* 3.176). In the *Odyssey*, the metaphor is first used of Odysseus, whose cheeks become wet with tears as he listens to Demodocus and is overcome by his emotions (τήκετο, δάκρυ δ' ἔδευεν ... παρεΐας, *Od.* 8.522). A veritable cluster of occurrences is found in *Od.* 19. Apart from two other instances to be mentioned below, the most famous case is the simile of melting

⁶ Caracciolo 2013, the quotation on p. 61. Caracciolo argues that such metaphors have a significant cognitive effect on the readers, as they allow them to experience the storyworld through the consciousness of a character. On the possible cognitive effects of metaphors of dissolving, see also Kuhn-Treichel 2024a, p. 12 and 2024b, p. 20.

⁷ Cfr. *LfgE* s.v. τήκω, where all examples for 'schmelzen im heutigen physik. Sinne' are from Hesiod. As Rutherford 1992, p. 166 observes, all occurrences in the *Odyssey* refer to Odysseus and Penelope – an interesting parallel to expressions of limb-loosening for sleep, to which the same applies.

snow that illustrates how Penelope weeps inconsolably for her husband, whom she believes to be still absent:

τῆς δ' ἄρ' ἀκουούσης ῥέε δάκρυα, τήκετο δὲ χρώς.
ὥς δὲ χιὼν κατατήκετ' ἐν ἀκροπόλοισιν ὄρεσσιν
ἦν τ' εὖρος κατέτηξεν, ἐπὶν ζέφυρος καταχεύῃ,
τηκομένης δ' ἄρα τῆς ποταμοὶ πλήθουσι ῥέοντες,
ὥς τῆς τήκετο καλὰ παρήϊα δάκρυ χεούσης,
κλαιούσης ἐὼν ἄνδρα, παρήμενον.

As she listened her tears ran and her skin was melting, as the snow melts along the high places of the mountains when the West Wind has piled it there, but the South Wind melts it, and as it melts the rivers run full flood. It was even so that her beautiful cheeks were melting, as she wept for her man, who was sitting there by her side. (*Od.* 19.204-209, transl. Lattimore mod.)

In all of these cases, melting is clearly figurative; the fact that the simile uses (κατα)τήκειν both in the tenor (metaphorically) and the vehicle (literally) makes it clear that the poet is aware of the conceptual mapping involved in the use of this verb⁸. The figurative use is grounded in an evident analogy: the liquid emanating from the eyes evokes the idea of melting ice or snow. Understood thus, the verb, though literally denoting a form of dissolving, does not even necessarily indicate a loss of firmness or cohesion. To be sure, especially when the subject is a person, one can imagine a body pining away with sorrow as ice or snow melts in the heat; this applies in particular to the case of Helen, where τέτηκα (the intransitive perfect of the mediopassive τήκομαι) denotes the result of the weeping rather than the process⁹. On the other hand, especially with the skin or the cheeks as subjects, one can just as well simply think of the water bedewing the cheeks, which seems to be the main point of the simile (perhaps together with the idea of 'snow-white' cheeks becoming red and hot)¹⁰.

In this latter case, the metaphor of melting would privilege an external perspective, as the weeping characters *look like* they are melting from the outside

⁸ This is worth noting because it refutes the (misconceived) objection against CMT that the metaphors postulated by it are not consciously identified as such by the poet; cfr. Leidl 2003, p. 38; Cairns 2014, n. 67.

⁹ Bowie 2019, p. 128 suggests the translation 'I am worn out by weeping'.

¹⁰ Cfr. *LfgE* s.v. τήκω 2: 'die Tränen werden als Produkt des "Abschmelzens" aufgefasst'; see also Onians 1951, pp. 201-202. But contrast Fränkel 1921, p. 33, who compares lines 136 and 264 (on which see below) and considers whether the simile might also hint at 'Penelopes Seele, die ... sich löst aus ihrer Starre'.

whereas the state of their body as a whole is, with the possible exception of Helen, not in the foreground. Notably, this is only a tendency, and it does not preclude the possibility that intradiegetic observers or recipients imagining the scene before their inner eyes may form an idea of how this process feels to Penelope. As indicated in the introduction, embodied emotions always have an intersubjective dimension, which involves not only the direct interaction between individuals but also the use of terms and concepts shaped by a linguistic community. For the quoted simile, this implies that even if the perspective is more external, the metaphor may induce some recipients to imagine a subjective experience of dissolving that goes beyond mere tears on the cheeks. There is no strict boundary between the subjective and the external perspective, but a considerable range of possible interpretations on the part of the recipient.

There are only three occurrences of verbs for melting that do not, or not necessarily, refer to weeping. In a simile, the verb refers to a father pining away with a lengthy illness (δηρὸν τηκόμενος, *Od.* 5.396). Here, the metaphor clearly indicates the state of the body as a whole, which loses its firmness in an existentially threatening way, but not due to emotions. Besides, there are two further occurrences in *Od.* 19. Before the simile, Penelope remarks: 'longing for Odysseus, I melt in my dear heart' (Ὀδυσῆ ποθέουσα φίλον κατατήκομαι ἦτορ, *Od.* 19.136). After the simile, Odysseus, still pretending to be a stranger, addresses Penelope with the words: 'do not melt away your spirit in lamentation for your husband' (μηδέ τι θυμὸν / τῆκε πόσιν γοῶσα, *Od.* 19.263-264). Given that the simile itself uses the idea of melting for Penelope's weeping, we may be tempted to associate these two occurrences with weeping as well, and indeed the repetition of the verb (κατα)τήκειν can hardly go unnoticed. However, the lines themselves do not refer to tears; on the contrary, they apply the verb to such nouns as ἦτορ and θυμός, which cannot be not physically affected by the emanation of tears¹¹.

In these cases, the idea of dissolving seems to prevail over the association with emerging water. Especially the two last cases are worth discussing, as they describe emotional states that can (probably) be felt in the body¹². The expression φίλον κατατήκομαι ἦτορ recalls the common formula λύτο γούνατα

¹¹ The rich bibliography on θυμός need not be repeated here; important studies include Schmitz 1965, pp. 374-414; Jahn 1987; Pelliccia 1995, pp. 200-268; Clarke 1999, pp. 61-126; Cairns 2014 and 2019; Zanker 2019, pp. 52-56.

¹² Latacz 1966, p. 227 remarks on *Od.* 19.227 (cfr. Krieter-Spiro 2009, p. 73): 'τήκομαι bezeichnet ... im psychischen Bereich stets das Dahinschmelzen, Sich-Verzehren vor Leid oder Sehnsucht (vgl. noch Γ 176. τ 204ff.), im physischen Bereich das Sich-Verzehren vor Schmerz (ε 395) ...' This dualistic distinction may be helpful for a categorisation but is problematic in that it suggests that psychic processes cannot be felt physically.

καὶ φίλον ἦτορ, which occurs later when Penelope finally recognises her husband (*Od.* 23.205, preceded by remarks about her hardened heart in lines 103, 167 and 172)¹³. According to the scattered expressions, Penelope's heart goes through a complex process: it melts when she talks to Odysseus disguised as a beggar, then stiffens again when she sees him as himself and fears falling for a fraudster and finally loosens when she recognises him through clear proof. Since melting is a metaphor, recipients are free to choose whether they associate the expression with specific bodily symptoms or rather with a more abstract mental experience, and in the former case, which symptoms these might be.

But what kind of bodily experience would make sense for the metaphor of melting in the given context? Perhaps the most plausible option is a reduced tonus, probably not in the heart itself but in the intercostal muscles surrounding it. The term ἦτορ would then stand for what the phenomenological philosopher Hermann Schmitz called a *Leibesinsel*, a vaguely defined area of the felt body (the *Leib* as opposed to the *Körper*, i.e. the physical body)¹⁴. The character could experience this loss of firmness in the body and the chest region in particular *as though* her heart was melting. The fact that Penelope complains a few lines before that the gods have destroyed her 'excellence in beauty and figure' (ἀρετὴν εἰδός τε δέμας τε, *Od.* 19.124), lends further plausibility to a corporeal interpretation of the melting metaphor: apparently, Penelope herself believes that the prolonged waiting for her husband has a detrimental effect on her body, and the metaphor of melting can be understood in the same sense.

The negated phrase θυμὸν τῆκε is more difficult to interpret. Given that the θυμός is typically (with a number of exceptions)¹⁵ not conceptualised as a solid body, the metaphor may focus on the aspect of dwindling away implied in melting, a notion that is also known from statements about the θυμός with the semantically related verb τείρειν¹⁶. How this may feel is up to the recipient to decide, but it could involve a loss of perceived vitality in the whole body¹⁷. Overall, the idea of melting in the Homeric epics can be associated with different bodily experiences, ranging from tears to a general loss of firmness or tension. The crucial point is that, at least in most of the cases, the recipients

¹³ On this formula, see Kuhn-Treichel 2024b with further references.

¹⁴ Schmitz 1965; cfr. my remarks on ἦτορ in Kuhn-Treichel 2024b, p. 18. The concept of the *Leib* goes back to Husserl; Merleau-Ponty developed it under the term *corps vécu*.

¹⁵ See e.g. the notion of the 'beating' θυμός (θυμός ἐνὶ στήθεσσι πάτασεν, *Il.* 7.216; cfr. 23.370, explained by *Lfgre* s.v. θυμός 14 as 'Gebr. nach Anal. des Herzens').

¹⁶ See *Il.* 17.744-745 (θυμός / τείρεθ' ...); *Il.* 22.242; *Od.* 10.78. The verb is also applied to κῆρ (*Od.* 1.341-342).

¹⁷ Cfr. Schmitz 1965, p. 410 on the θυμός as 'gespürte Erfüllung des eigenen Leibes durch Regungen'.

are encouraged to associate the melting metaphor with some sort of bodily experience related with what we would call emotions, even if the metaphor allows for a certain range of interpretations. Does this apply to Euripides, too?

Melting and embodied emotions in Euripides

Euripides frequently uses the verb *τήκειν* and its compounds with reference to a character's emotional state, and in some of the cases he does so in ways that differ from extant older authors. As in the Homeric epics, there is a certain conceptual link between expressions with *τήκειν* and those with *λύειν*. This becomes particularly obvious in the *Hecuba* (staged around 424), where, as we shall soon see, both of them are used in close proximity to each other, thus helping us understand the implications of *τήκειν*. Polyxena, about to be led away by Odysseus and to be killed by Neoptolemus, remarks in what is her last speech on stage:

κόμιζ', Ὀδυσσεῦ, μ' ἀμφιθεῖς κάραι πέπλους,
ὥς πρὶν σφαγῆναί γ' ἐκτέτηκα καρδίαν
θρήνοισι μητρὸς τήνδε τ' ἐκτίκω γόοις.

Wrap this garment about my head, Odysseus, and take me away, for the heart within me, before my slaughter, has been melted by the lamentations of my mother, and I melt her with mine. (E. *Hec.* 432-434, transl. Kovacs mod.)¹⁸

The metaphor of the melting heart is known from the *Odyssey*, where Penelope uses it with regard to her longing for her husband, albeit with another term for the heart (*κατατήκομαι ἥτορ*, *Od.* 19.136, cfr. above)¹⁹. Here, the situation is evidently different, although it too has to do with the separation from a loved one, and ultimately with the experience of losing control: the fact that Polyxena is about to be killed causes shock and grief both in herself and her mother. There are three aspects that deserve our attention. The first is the parallel, or interplay, between the daughter and her mother. According to Polyxena's words, they are connected through their melting, which is caused not so much by the imminent death itself but by each other's lamentations. Apparently, the emotional reaction expressed by the metaphor of melting is based

¹⁸ Kovacs translates 'I melt her heart', which is grammatically possible if the accusative of respect *καρδίαν* is supplied after *τήνδε τ' ἐκτίκω*. Battezzato 2018, p. 130 translates 'I melt her'; cfr. Matthiessen 2008, p. 124.

¹⁹ Besides, it is attested in a fragment from an unknown play by Euripides, where the reason is fear (fr. 908.6 Radt, cfr. below).

on a strong sense of empathy²⁰. The interaction between the mother and her daughter intensifies the emotional experience because emotion is essentially a relational, socially embedded phenomenon. Mutual lamenting can therefore result in a sort of intersubjective emotional and bodily state, which anticipates the ultimate dissolution of death that Polyxena will soon experience²¹.

In this context – and this is the second aspect –, the plea to wrap a garment around the head can be seen as a form of emotion regulation or emotion management²². The πέπλοι form a barrier between Polyxena and her mother, which, at least in Polyxena's eyes, may mitigate the distress that she and her mother are causing each other. The wish to break the visual contact – known as one of the earliest means of emotion regulation learned by young infants – underscores the interactive and intersubjective character of the emotions on stage, as well as their embodied nature, which requires a physical means of control. At the same time, the veiling recalls funerary rituals, all the more so since Hecuba follows her daughter in covering her head, as shown soon afterwards (*Hec.* 486-487)²³. It thus anticipates another, more ritualised form of embodied emotions: the collective mourning for Polyxena's death.

My third point is the link between the metaphor of melting and another common expression of dissolving, viz. the idea of loosening the limbs. A few lines after the quoted passage, Hecuba wails as Odysseus leads away her daughter Polyxena to be killed by Neoptolemus, describing what seems like a sudden loss of muscular tension, a natural physiological response to the terrifying news concerning her daughter²⁴:

οἱ ἄγω, προλείπω, λύεται δέ μου μέλη.
 ὦ θύγατερ, ἄψαι μητρός, ἔκτεινον χέρα,
 δός, μὴ λίπηις μ' ἄπαιδ'. ἀπωλόμην, φίλαι.

Ah, ah! I am faint! My limbs are unstrung! Daughter, take hold of your mother, stretch out your hand, give it to me, do not leave me childless! My friends, my life is over! (E. *Hec.* 438-440, transl. Kovacs)

As explained in the previous section, the strongly metaphorical character of

²⁰ I use this term in the basic sense of 'feeling with'; for its complex history, see Lanzoni 2018.

²¹ For the effects of mutual lamentation, one may compare the encounter of Achilles and Priam in *Il.* 24; cfr. the discussion of this scene in Cairns 2023.

²² On the use of garments in emotion regulation, see Cairns 2009 and 2011.

²³ For the different functions of veiling, including mourning, see Cairns 2002.

²⁴ From a neurobiological perspective, this loss of tension can be explained as the shock phase of the General Adaptation Syndrome (dominated by the parasympathetic system, cfr. e.g. Morschitzky 2009, pp. 239-244).

expressions with melting in reference to the human body opens up a certain range of interpretations: one can think of specific bodily sensations, but also of more abstract mental processes. Against this backdrop, it is interesting to note that Hecuba takes up the idea of dissolving in a varied form, replacing the image of melting with that of loosening, with a strong emphasis on bodily weakness. When Hecuba asks Polyxena to stretch out her hand, this can be understood both as a wish to remain in contact and as a request for physical support. Read together, Polyxena's reference to her mother's melting and Hecuba's own remark about her loosened limbs suggest that both expressions describe a state of physical weakness or, more precisely, a loss of bodily tension due to the shocking events. This does not make the expressions with melting less metaphorical, but it supports the possibility of understanding them in a bodily way, as an image for a feeling of weakness or a lack of energy, be it in the chest region or the whole body²⁵.

Apart from this passage, Euripides uses expressions with *τήκειν*, *ἐκτήκειν* and *συντήκειν* in a considerable number of other plays, in some cases in the active, with a person or a part of the body as an object, in others in the mediopassive, sometimes with supplements such as *λύπαις* or *νόσῳ*²⁶. Several of the other occurrences of *ἐκτήκειν* are explicitly connected with tears²⁷. In the *Helen*, Theoclymenus exhorts the eponymous heroine not to 'melt away your skin with tears' (*σὸν δάκρυσιν ἐκτήξῃς χροῖα*, *E. Hel.* 1419); in the *Orestes*, we twice find the idea of melting away the eyes with tears (*ὄμμα δ' ἐκτήξουσ' ἔμῳ / δακρύοις*, *Or.* 134-135; *δακρύοις ὀφθαλμὸν ἐκτήκω*, *Or.* 529). These cases come very close to melting metaphors in Homer, which also often refer to tears; in particular, the line from the *Helen* recalls the passage in which Penelope's skin is described as melting (*τήκετο δὲ χροῖς*, *Od.* 19.204, cfr. above). Perhaps Empedocles' theory that tears come about when blood is 'liquefied' (*αἷματος τηκομένου*, 31 A78 DK), thus deriving from 'real' and not just metaphorical liquefaction, was a further motivating factor for the repeated use of the *ἐκτήκειν* for tears in Euripides.

However, we also find instances of the metaphor of melting in Euripides in which the connection with the human body and embodied emotions is more difficult to assess. The following sections of this paper will discuss two groups

²⁵ Cfr. the explanation in Battezzato 2018, p. 131.

²⁶ Apart from the cases mentioned below, Euripides uses *τήκειν* and compounds in the active in *IA* 398 (*ἐμὲ συντήξουσιν νύκτες ἡμέραι τε δακρύοις*) and *Cyc.* 459 (*ὄμμα τ' ἐκτήξω πυρί*), in the mediopassive in *El.* 240 (with *λύπαις*), *Or.* 34 (with *νόσῳ*; cfr. 283) and *Or.* 860 (*ἐξετηκόμην γόοις*).

²⁷ These cases are the primary focus of the study of *τήκειν* in Homer and tragedy by Arnould 1986.

of such cases: metaphors referring to the abstracta life and time (occurring in the *Medea*) and those dealing with the soul (in the *Heracidae* and the *Electra*).

Special cases 1: melting life and time

A remarkable cluster of verbs of melting is found in the *Medea*. All of the expressions refer to Medea herself, who is distraught after being deserted by her husband. The situation recalls *Od.* 19, where the metaphor of melting is applied numerous times to Penelope longing for her husband, who has in fact already returned. Some of the uses in the *Medea* are rather conventional, especially against the backdrop of the Homeric epics. The chorus exhorts Medea not to ‘melt excessively’ by mourning for her husband (μη λῖαν τάκου δυρομένα σὸν εὐνέταν, *E. Med.* 159), just as Odysseus, in the guise of the stranger, urges Penelope not to melt away her spirit in lamentation of her husband (μηδέ τι θυμὸν / τῆκε πόσιν γοώωσα, *Od.* 19.263-264). Aegeus asks her why her ‘eyes and skin are dissolved’ (τί γὰρ σὸν ὄμμα χρώς τε συντέτηχ’ ὄδε, *E. Med.* 689), apparently referring to her tears and their effect on the skin, which are also mentioned by Penelope (ῥέε δάκρυα, τήκετο δὲ χρώς, *Od.* 19.204).

The cases quoted so far are immediately comprehensible, at least in light of their epic precursors, and can easily be associated with bodily manifestations of emotions such as tears, swollen skin and general weakness. However, there are also more unusual applications of the metaphor of melting in the *Medea*. The nurse explains to the chorus that her mistress is ‘melting away her life-force (or: lifetime) in her chamber’ (ἡ δ’ ἐν θαλάμοις τήκει βιοτήν, *E. Med.* 141)²⁸. Compared to the tragic examples discussed so far, the object βιοτή adds another degree of metaphoricity. While the body or its parts do not actually melt, they are at least physical objects that can actually undergo changes of their consistency. The abstract βιοτή, by contrast, cannot be affected in a physical way; it must be imagined as a solid object that comes to be dissolved²⁹. This does not exclude further associations with bodily weakness, especially when βιοτή is understood on a physiological level, but the expression has such a high degree of metaphoricity that different interpretations are possible.

The most debated occurrence of the melting metaphor in the *Medea*, howev-

²⁸ On βιοτή as ‘life-force’, see Mastronarde 2002, p. 194. One of the anonymous readers suggests ‘lifetime’ instead, like αἰὼν in *Od.* 5.151, 160; I will come back to this possibility below.

²⁹ The conceptualisation of abstract concepts as solid objects (i.e. ontological metaphor) is of course a common strategy. My point is only the difference between the instances of the metaphor of melting in tragedy and the possible associations with the body.

er, is the very first one, also voiced by the nurse, which poses severe problems of translation and interpretation:

κεῖται δ' ἄσιτος, σῶμ' ὑφεῖς' ἀλγηδόσιν,
τὸν πάντα συντήκουσα δακρύοις χρόνον
ἐπεὶ πρὸς ἀνδρὸς ἤισθετ' ἡδίκημένη,
οὔτ' ὄμμ' ἐπαίρουσ' οὔτ' ἀπαλλάσσουσα γῆς
πρόσωπον· ὥς δὲ πέτρος ἢ θαλάσσιος
κλύδων ἀκούει νουθετουμένη φίλων ...

She lies fasting, giving her body up to pain, making the whole time melt away [or: melting away all the time] with her tears since she learned that she was wronged by her husband, neither raising her face nor taking her eyes from the ground. She is as deaf to the advice of her friends as a stone or a wave of the sea ... (E. *Med.* 24-29, transl. Kovacs mod.)

The first aspect that catches the eye in these lines is the detailed and extended description of Medea's bodily state. The description is not limited to an expression of dissolving, but we learn in an unambiguous, almost medically accurate way that she lies motionless without eating or interacting with others. These indications seem to fit in well with what we have seen so far, but this makes the precise wording all the more puzzling. The problem starts on the grammatical level³⁰. Given that συντήκουσα is active, an object seems to be needed, and from a syntactical point of view, τὸν πάντα ... χρόνον is the easiest option. This would result in the notion of making time melt away. The metaphor then would rest on the concept of time as a solid object, and the idea of making this object melt could imply that the time is wasted away, or that its subdivisions (something one could associate with a solid aggregate state) are blurred. To be sure, this is only one of the grammatical interpretations suggested by scholars, and before asking how this metaphor relates to embodied emotions, the alternative constructions have to be briefly considered.

One possibility is to take σῶμ(α) from the line before as the object and τὸν πάντα ... χρόνον as an accusative of time ('making her body melt away all the time'). This is grammatically possible but less likely because it disregards the rhetorical structure of the sentence, i.e. the tricolon (ἄσιτος, σῶμ' ὑφεῖς' ..., τὸν πάντα ...) and the parallel of object plus participle (σῶμ' ὑφεῖς' – τὸν πάντα συντήκουσα ... χρόνον). Another solution would be to

³⁰ On the problems, see Mastronarde 2002, p. 168, who describes the line as 'conflating the consumption of time (normally διάγειν or ἀναλίσκω) with the wasting away of the person crying (συντήκεσθαι).' Cfr. also Manuwald 2024, p. 80.

take συντήκουσα, which should be normally transitive, as intransitive like its perfect συντέτηκα, with τὸν πάντα ... χρόνον again as an accusative of time ('melting away the whole time'). However, the evidence for an intransitive use of τήκειν or its compounds in the present tense is thin at best: a fragment from an unknown play by Euripides contains the line τήκω τάλαιναν καρδίαν ὀρρωδίαι (E. fr. 908.6 Radt), in which τήκω is sometimes taken in an intransitive sense ('my poor heart melts with fear', with καρδίαν as an accusative of respect as in *Hec.* 433); but καρδίαν could just as well be the object, which is grammatically clearly preferable ('I let my heart melt')³¹. In short, the alternative constructions are not very convincing; but what can we make of the metaphor of melting time?

First, it should be noted that this metaphor is less peculiar than it may seem. Depending on the understanding of βιοτή in line 141 ('life-force' or 'lifetime'), Euripides might reuse the idea in the same play. More importantly, however, the idea of time as a liquid can be traced back to Homer. When Odysseus longs for his home on Calypso's island, 'his eyes never became dry from tears and his sweet lifetime was flowing away' (οὐδέ ποτ' ὅσσε / δακρυόφιν τέρσοντο, κατείβετο δὲ γλυκὺς αἰὼν, *Od.* 5.151-152)³². The verb κατείβετο does not necessarily imply that the lifetime passes from the solid to the liquid state, but at any rate it describes time as a liquid³³. What makes this example so interesting is that Odysseus, just as Medea, is also described as crying, a process that not only involves a liquid but is elsewhere in Homer described with the very verb here applied to time (κατείβετο δάκρυ, *Il.* 24.794). This suggests a convergence of time and tears, which is also relevant for the Euripidean passage, provided that my translation is correct: on the one hand, the metaphor describes an abstract experience of time, without reference to the body, but on the other, it alludes to the bodily phenomenon of tears, whose liquid aggregate state is projected on time, as well as Medea's physical weakness in general. In other words, even if the metaphor of melting refers to an abstraction, it is still closely associated with embodied emotions.

³¹ The translation by Collard and Cropp ('my poor heart is worn down') suggests an intransitive sense, whereas Radt, in his apparatus, adduces *Med.* 141 (τήκει βιοτήν) as a parallel, suggesting a transitive sense. Cfr. also the parallel transitive construction in *Od.* 19.263-264 (μηδὲ τι θυμὸν / τήκε).

³² In *Od.* 5.160-161, this is taken up in the similar but less liquid-focused expression μηδὲ τοι αἰὼν / φθινέτω.

³³ The most extensive discussion of conceptual metaphors of time in Homer is Zanker 2019, pp. 61-102, where these examples are however not included. The idea of liquid time can be subsumed under the larger category ABSTRACTIONS ARE LIQUIDS, which is also instantiated by examples such as χέω with abstract nouns.

Special cases 2: the melting soul

The *Medea* is not the only play in which Euripides uses the metaphor of melting in ways hitherto unseen. We have already seen the idea of the melting heart, expressed with καρδία as an accusative of respect. In two other plays, Euripides exchanges the heart in this expression for the soul. This is a noteworthy innovation in the use of metaphors of melting, and it raises important questions with regard to embodied emotions. Early and classical Greek authors did not consider the soul a bodily organ comparable to the heart, but the precise understanding of the soul and its possible interplay with the body differed considerably. In Homer, ψυχή only means ‘life’ or ‘departed spirit’ (*LSJ* s.v. I and II)³⁴. It is not a body part, but contained within the body, as can be seen when it is localised ‘in’ a living person (ἐν δὲ ἴα ψυχῇ, 21.569) or leaves the physical body in death (e.g. τὸν δ’ ἔλιπε ψυχῇ, *Il.* 5.696; 14.426). It can also, by means of ontological metaphor, be reified as an object and even be said to be ‘dissolved’ in death, a concept close enough to melting (λύθη ψυχὴ τε μένος τε, *Il.* 5.296; 8.123, 315)³⁵.

However, none of these cases is concerned with embodied emotions. When Euripides uses the term ψυχή, this may be different. By his time, the ψυχή had acquired an important position in anthropological thinking as well as poetic expressions³⁶. To be sure, the term was still rather vaguely defined and certainly not used in the same way by every author, but it came to be understood as an essential feature of man. Pre-Socratic philosophers variously associated the soul with air, fire, blood and water³⁷. More frequently, medical authors refer to the soul as a counterpart to the body, including ideas such as a warming of the soul³⁸. Poetic appropriations of the idea of the soul can be found in authors such as Pindar or, more prominently, Sophocles. In scholarship, the rise of the concept of the soul is often taken as a, if not the, major transition in ancient anthropology, leading from a unified concept of man to psychophysical dualism. According to Schmitz, this transition can already be seen between Aeschylus, whose language is still body-centred, and Sophocles, who privileges the idea

³⁴ On ψυχή in Homer, see *Lfgre* s.v. ψυχή with doxography; prominent studies include Bremmer 1983; Jahn 1987; Clarke 1999.

³⁵ For further metaphorical reifications of the soul, see Cairns 2014, §§11-17.

³⁶ On the rise of the concept of the soul before Plato, see Claus 1981; cfr. also the brief overviews by Ricken 1995; Rowe 2016. For the semantic range of ψυχή in Euripides, see Schlesier 1998; Cairns 2017, pp. 251-254.

³⁷ For an overview of ideas of the soul in the pre-Socratics, see Claus 1981, pp. 122-155.

³⁸ On σῶμα and ψυχή in Hippocratic medicine, see Gundert 2000; the warming soul is discussed in Hp. *Vict.* 3.61.

of the soul³⁹. The adequateness of this and similar teleological narratives is subject to debate, but the question remains how the rise of *ψυχή* affects the expression of embodied emotions in poetic language.

Indeed, one can observe how the *ψυχή* takes over functions of body-related phrases in older poetry. While Homeric characters can address their heart in self-exhortations (e.g. *τέτλαθι δῆ, κραδίη*, *Od.* 20.18), Pindar refers to the soul in a similar context (*μή, φίλα ψυχά ..., Pi. P.* 3.61). While in Homer, the heart can be said to groan (*ἐν δέ τέ οἱ κραδίηι στένει ἄλκιμον ἦτορ*, *Il.* 20.169), in Sophocles it is the soul that groans (*ἦ δ' ἐμῇ / ψυχῇ πόλιν τε κάμει καὶ σ' ὁμοῦ στένει*, *S. OT* 63-64). In both cases, one can argue that the Homeric expressions are, or can easily be, associated with bodily sensations, also because the contexts give indications to this effect: in *Od.* 20, the heart is first said to 'bark', which seems to denote violent pounding; in *Il.* 20, the statement about the heart is preceded by a remark about 'foam around the teeth', which suggests a physical stress reaction⁴⁰. In Pindar and Sophocles, by contrast, the analogous statements seem to denote abstract mental processes without a physiological component; at any rate, there are no indications that suggest that the body may be involved⁴¹. On the other hand, the Theognidea mention the *ψυχή* alongside the *θυμός*, with a metaphor of biting that associates the former with a discomfort that *could* have a bodily component (*δάκνομαι ψυχῇν*, *Thgn.* 910).

Against this backdrop, Euripides' metaphor of the melting soul – as an adaptation of an expression that is otherwise often associated with the body – offers a welcome opportunity to pursue the question whether references to the soul are necessarily opposed to the body or to corporeal sensations. But how exactly does Euripides employ this metaphor? In the *Heraclidae*, Iolaus uses it to describe Alcmene's fear for her grandchildren; an analogous metaphor is used by Electra in the tragedy of the same name, with regard to her own state, dispelled from her father's home and living in the countryside as the wife of a peasant. How unusual this metaphor is, at least for modern ears, can be seen from the fact that translators often render it rather freely; a near-literal translation would run as follows:

³⁹ Schmitz 1965, pp. 457-461, who inverts Snell's much-criticised idea of a discovery of the mind by postulating a gradual concealment of the *Leib*. He boldly concludes: 'Die Ablösung des Aischylos durch Sophokles scheint mir daher zu den tiefsten Einschnitten in der Geschichte menschlicher Selbstdeutung zu gehören' (p. 457).

⁴⁰ On the famous metaphor of the barking heart, see e.g. Schmitz 1965, p. 446; Rose 1979; Pelliccia 1995, p. 30; Grethlein 2017, pp. 79-80.

⁴¹ *S. OT* 64 is also adduced by Schmitz 1965, p. 459 in the context of the aforementioned argument.

πάλαι γὰρ ὠδίνουσα τῶν ἀφιγμένων
 ψυχὴν ἐτήκου νόστος εἰ γενήσεται.

For you have long been in agony, and your soul melting, whether those who have now arrived would ever return. (*Herac.* 644-645, transl. Kovacs mod.)

αὐτὰ δ' ἐν χερνῆσι δόμοις
 ναίω ψυχὰν τακομένα
 δωμάτων φυγὰς πατρίων ...

And I myself in a toiler's cottage dwell with a melting soul, exiled from my father's house ... (*El.* 207-209, transl. Kovacs mod.)⁴²

By replacing καρδίαν with ψυχὴν (or in a lyric passage -άν), the lines evoke the image of the soul as a solid object that comes to be dissolved; the underlying conceptual metaphor would be THE SOUL IS A SOLID OBJECT. This evidently involves a farther-reaching mental projection than in the case of the heart, which does not melt either, but is an actual physical object. But does this rule out an association with a bodily experience? In the *Heraclidae*, the situation is equivocal. The other verb used in the expression, ὠδίνω, is originally body-related ('have the pains of childbirth'). By Euripides' time, it had become a common metaphor for emotions, but perhaps the original association with physical pain could still be felt, especially when the verb was applied to a woman⁴³. Alcmene, who enters the stage after Iolaus' words, admits that her 'strength is weak' (ἄσθενής μὲν ἦ γ' ἐμὴ / ῥώμῃ, *E. Heracl.* 648-649), but it remains unclear whether this has to do with the sorrow described by Iolaus or simply with her old age.

The *Electra* gives some more explicit indications. A little earlier, in the *strophe* of the song in whose *antistrophe* the melting metaphor is used, Electra points out that she is weeping night and day (*El.* 181-182). In this way, she explicitly mentions the very bodily phenomenon that is already associated with the metaphor of melting in the Homeric epics. In the following lines (*El.* 184-185, metrically corresponding to those in which the melting metaphor occurs), she goes on to describe her dirty hair and worn-out clothes, further details that

⁴² Kovacs translates 'you have long been in painful suspense' and 'dwell heart-worn', without the term 'soul'; Cropp renders *El.* 208 more literally: 'my soul wasting away'. The commentaries are surprisingly reticent about these melting metaphors (nothing in Wilkins 1993; Denniston 1939; Roisman-Luschnig 2011).

⁴³ On the different usages, see *LSJ* s.v. ὠδίνω I and II. The verb is also connected with ψυχή in *E. Hipp.* 258-260 (also with reference to women), instructively discussed by Cairns 2017, pp. 251-252 with n. 19.

show how her state involves her body or her physical appearance, probably including the actor's costume. Through these descriptions, it is clear that the state of despair, to which the melting metaphor refers, is by no means restricted to an immaterial inner self. This is not to say that the soul is necessarily conceived of as part of the body, but apparently there is an analogy between the state of the body and the state of the soul, both of which are somehow in bad shape. The state of the body is visible on stage, and the audience can infer that this state reflects the character's personal bodily experience, which mirrors the state of her soul⁴⁴.

At least in the *Electra*, then, the melting metaphor applied to ψυχάν is used in a way that does not differ so much from its counterpart with καρδίαν. The passage from the *Heraclidae* is less clear, but does at any rate not rule out such an interpretation. To be sure, this impression, in particular in the *Electra*, is mostly a result of the accompanying references to the body, whereas the metaphor in itself could also be understood in a purely abstract way, as an illustration of an immaterial inner state that need not manifest itself in a physiological way. In the end, as so often, it is up to recipients how they understand the metaphor, which, precisely due to its high degree of metaphoricity, allows for different interpretations. The reference to the soul rather than a part of the body remains a significant innovation, both in Greek thought in general and in the history of melting metaphors, but the examples demonstrate that the new way of speaking does not automatically rule out old ways of thinking about the body and emotions. Unlike Homer, Euripides has a term for an abstract inner self, i.e. ψυχή, but this does not mean that he contrasts body and the soul; rather, his use of ψυχή goes hand in hand with a focus on bodily experience⁴⁵.

A sideways glance at Aeschylus and Sophocles

This article has concentrated on Homer and Euripides, who both provide rich material for studying the use of melting as a metaphor for embodied emotions. Before reaching conclusions, it is worth asking whether anything comparable exists in the works of the other major tragic poets. Aeschylus does not use this type of metaphor in his surviving plays. What comes closest is an expression

⁴⁴ Electra's outward appearance can also be seen as part of a ritualised mourning for her lost home, but this does not rule out that it reflects her 'inner' state.

⁴⁵ Cfr. Schlesier 1998, p. 38: 'ψυχή [ist] bei Euripides grundsätzlich physisch fundiert und niemals im spirituellen Sinne als rein geistige Seele – im Gegensatz zum rein materiellen Körper – zu interpretieren.' See also the examples from *Hipp.* discussed by Cairns 2017, pp. 251-254, including such body-related cases as a bed-bound ψυχή (εὐναία δέδετα ψυχά, *Hipp.* 160) and the marrow of the ψυχή (μυελὸν ψυχῆς, *Hipp.* 255).

with λύειν in *Pers.* 913, where Xerxes, returning to his court after his fleet has been defeated and seeing the old men who are left in the city, exclaims in emphatic anapaests: ‘for the strength of my limbs is dissolved’ (λέλνται γὰρ ἐμοὶ γνίων ῥώμη, *A. Pers.* 913). Sophocles employs a limited number of expressions with τήκειν or its compounds in the *Antigone* and the *Electra*, but with remarkable differences between these two plays. In the older *Antigone*, first performed probably 442 BCE, τήκειν is only applied to predominantly physical contexts such as a rotting corpse (εἰ πόσις μοι κατθανὼν ἐτήκετο, *Ant.* 906) or men suffering after being blinded (κατὰ δὲ τακόμενοι, *Ant.* 979). The latter case is relevant for the study of embodied emotions insofar as the blinded men are also described as crying (κλαῖον, *Ant.* 980); apparently, the suffering expressed through the metaphor of melting is at least in part caused by emotional rather than just physical pain.

In the *Electra*, by contrast, the expressions refer to the heroine’s state of despair after her father’s death; in one case, tears are mentioned, as in the Homeric epics (κλαίω, τέτηκα, *El.* 283), in the others, the description is more general (the chorus asks Electra: τίς ἄν / τάκεις ὧδ’ ἀκόρεστον οἰμωγὰν / τὸν ... Ἀγαμέμνονα; *El.* 122-125; cfr. ἄνευ τοκέων κατατάκομαι, *El.* 187; ἐμοῦ τακομένου, *El.* 835)⁴⁶. As the *Electra* was written relatively late in Sophocles’ career, it is possible that he was inspired by Euripides’ use of melting metaphors. In fact, there is a remarkable parallel between Euripides’ *Medea* and Sophocles’ *Electra* in that the eponymous heroines of both plays, suffering from emotional pain, are repeatedly described with metaphors of melting. An important difference between these two tragedies is that Sophocles’ metaphors of melting are – apart from the one referring to crying – less explicitly associated with bodily manifestations of emotions. It is certainly still possible for the spectators to imagine a bodily experience when they hear these metaphors, all the more so as they see Electra on stage, but the text places less emphasis on the physical aspect than Euripides does.

Conclusions

What can we learn from comparing the metaphors of melting in Homer and Euripides? First, as far as embodied emotions are concerned, melting is a rather complex metaphor. It can be associated with different bodily experiences

⁴⁶ *El.* 122-125 is difficult to translate verbatim. ‘Why do you let such unceasing lament for Agamemnon ever melt away?’ comes close; *LSJ* s.v. τήκω I.2 explains: τί ὧδε τήκει οἰμώζουσα τὸν Ἀγ. (‘why do you melt away mourning Agamemnon’).

induced by strong negative emotions, but there are also cases where recipients can think of more abstract ‘mental’ experiences. Expectably, this latter case is more common in Euripides, but already in Homer melting metaphors applied to the ἥτορ or the θυμός allow for a certain range of interpretations, including bodily and non-bodily ones. The most interesting result is that even in Euripides, in spite of his at times seemingly more artificial melting metaphors, the recipients are more often than not encouraged to associate the expressions – which always refer to negative experiences – with bodily symptoms. This is true even in the case of the metaphor of the melting soul, which seems to correspond to a certain bodily state. For Euripides as a tragic poet, such somatic manifestations of mental processes were probably particularly appealing when they could be made visible on stage, as in the case of the physical interaction between Hecuba and Polyxena or Electra’s neglected appearance⁴⁷.

Overall, Euripides’ appropriation of the metaphor of melting, as well as his way of depicting emotions more generally, reflects several overlapping factors. On the one hand, a new anthropological terminology is emerging, including the concept of the soul. On the other hand, there is still the integrative concept of the body known from the Homeric epics, in which almost every experience is felt in or connected with the body – a concept transmitted through literary models, but probably also rooted in bodily experience⁴⁸. Finally, there is the dramatic genre, which fosters a perspective on emotions as subjective experiences visibly expressed on stage. Euripides’ melting metaphors represent not only a new time with new ideas about human nature, but even more so a *tragic* expression of embodied emotions, recognisable enough to be parodied by Aristophanes⁴⁹. In some ways, however, the Homeric and Euripidean metaphors have more in common than one might expect in view of the obvious differences between the texts – most importantly, a strong interest in emotion as bodily experience.

⁴⁷ Medea is a special case because she is not on stage in the first part of the play and has to be imagined.

⁴⁸ Schmitz 1965, p. 339 characterises this concept succinctly, if perhaps too boldly, as a time ‘in der nichts erlebt wurde, ohne daß dieses Erleben am eigenen Leib gespürt worden wäre.’

⁴⁹ Ar. *Ve.* 317; *Plu.* 1034. In the latter passage, the parodical twist is particularly evident: Γρ. ὑπὸ τοῦ γὰρ ἄλγους κατατέτηκ’, ὦ φίλτατε. / Χρ. οὐκ, ἀλλὰ κατασέσηπας, ὥς γ’ ἐμοὶ δοκεῖς (‘Old Woman: In fact I’m pining away with grief, my dear man. Chremylus: No, you’re rotting away, if you ask me.’ *Plu.* 1034-1035, transl. Henderson). See also Piqueux 2022, pp. 270-271 on comic parodies of passages such as E. *Hipp.* 198-200.

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