

ΦΑΣΜΑΤΑ AND SENSORY PERCEPTION
IN THE LAST EPISODE OF EURIPIDES' *ALCESTIS**

Several studies have focused on such themes as the “double”, visions, and dreams in ancient Greece, and have dealt with categories like *ὄνειρατα*, *εἶδωλα*, and *φάσματα*. However, while the topic of dreams has been fully looked into and many works concentrate on *εἶδωλα*, *φάσμα* is a word - and a cultural category - which still remains to be analysed in detail¹.

The aim of this study is to examine a case of poetic representation of *φάσμα*, namely, the last episode of Euripides' *Alcestis* and, in particular, the encounter between Admetus and his wife brought back from the Underworld by Heracles at lines 1112ff.² This passage is a good example of the type of interaction and communication which takes place between a mortal and what he considers to be a phantom. When Admetus comes face to face with Alcestis, he is persuaded that she is a *φάσμα νερτέρων*, a creature sent by the gods from the Underworld to deceive him³. Only several lines later and after long hesitation is he persuaded of her real identity and of the fact that she is alive⁴. In this progressive identification of Alcestis, a crucial role is played by sensory perception. Admetus is gradually led to verify the material reality of his spouse and to consequently admit that she is not merely a *φάσμα*. In addition, the study of Admetus' perception throughout the whole passage can help modern readers move a step towards understanding what features characterize *φάσματα* in classical culture and were considered pertinent by the Greeks themselves when representing these entities.

Before turning to focus on Admetus' experience, it is worth introducing the subject of the

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¹ The topic of *φάσμα* and of supernatural apparitions is cross-cutting and therefore the works that need to be taken into account are various and cover different areas. Among the most relevant are those by Jean Pierre Vernant, which focus on the theme of image and double: in particular VERNANT 1965; 1990; 1996 (in Vernant 2007, pp. 239 – 611; 1521–1661; 2017-50). Moreover, closely related to the subject are the works by Maurizio Bettini which concentrate on the double in the classical world (mainly BETTINI 1992; 2004; 2012). Concerning the topic of dreams, bibliography is certainly more substantial and the subject has been thoroughly studied. It is impossible for me here to give account of the vast production which exists and which is related to the topic; however, the works which are, for their approach and method, the most closely related to my research are: BRILLANTE 1991; 1996 and 2005; JOHNSTON 2002; HARRIS 2009. A recent and thorough contribution on epiphanies is in PETRIDOU 2015.

² This work does not aim at giving a complete account of what the cultural category of *φάσμα* is in ancient Greece and of all its aspects and occurrences. On the contrary, by studying the aforementioned lines from Euripides' *Alcestis*, it puts forward an argument concerning the relationship between *φάσματα* and mortals, and some of the possible ways in which the interaction between them can be addressed.

³ Eur. *Alc.* 1127.

⁴ The final identification happens at lines 1133-4, when Heracles finally persuades him that Alcestis is not just an illusory apparition.

senses and how the perception of φάσματα was generally represented in classical Greece, in order to tackle the matter from a broader perspective. My aim is to consider an aspect of the ancient Greek culture and to study it from a “emic” point of view, that is with the cultural models and categories that belonged to the Greeks. Therefore, I will try to get as close as possible to their own way of depicting phantoms and supernatural beings and, at the same time, to keep the necessary distance from our modern notions of phantoms which could be misleading. Modern representation of ghosts as mainly anthropomorphic and evanescent beings is not to be taken for granted for it is not, as many texts from antiquity show us, universal⁵. An anthropological approach is therefore suggested, with the intention of casting light not only on the literary aspect but on a deeper aspect of Greek culture as well⁶. This type of analysis is particularly important because φάσματα cover a wide range of seemingly different phenomena in ancient Greek language and literature. For this reason, it is necessary to identify some features which are common to this kind of event in order to look better into its specific nature. The numerous phenomena which go under the name of φάσμα include, but are not limited to: anthropomorphic apparitions - which are probably the closest to the modern notion of phantoms - along with spectral creatures from the Underworld⁷; celestial and meteorological phenomena⁸; apparitions occurring to mortals in their sleep and analogous to dreams⁹. In the following pages emphasis will be placed on the senses involved in the perception of these events.

1. SIGHT

Focusing on the etymology of φάσμα, the relation with the semantic field of appearance is evident¹⁰. Therefore, the kind of sensory perception which is most likely to be involved is vision and sight¹¹. Most studies which deal with the topic of dreams and of so-called supernatural

⁵ To consider Greek φάσματα just as some kind of umbratile and evanescent doubles or as substitutes of the dead, as we would be tempted to do today, would mean focusing only on a limited part of the semantic field the word covers and leaving out a large part of the term's cultural relevance (STRAMAGLIA 1999, pp. 29-30). For the origin of ghost-stories as a literary genre and for ghosts to start playing the role they typically have in the modern age see *ibid.* 52-5. Concerning the characteristics of phantoms in the modern age a good account can be found in Ludwig Lavater's work (1570), especially in the first chapter (1-10), where definitions of the single terms and words indicating supernatural beings are provided. For φάσμα in particular see page 2.

⁶ For the importance of comparativism between cultures and for the effectiveness of an anthropological approach when looking into another culture see BETTINI 2009. In particular (24-8) this article stresses the importance of the differences which exist between the modern culture and the culture of the classical world.

⁷ See, for instance, Hdt. 6. 69, where a φάσμα has the appearance of Ariston King of Sparta (see *infra*); Hdt. 8. 84 mentions on the other hand the φάσμα of a woman; Phleg. *Mir.* 1 contains the paradoxographical story of Philinnion, a dead young woman who comes back from the Underworld for three days.

⁸ They can be eclipses, as in Hdt. 7. 37; or other sudden phenomena such as rain in a dry area, as in Hdt. 3. 10. 3; or unexpected bolts of lighting, as in Hdt. 4. 79. For other kinds of celestial apparitions and pertaining discussion see *infra*.

⁹ These are particularly frequent in tragedy (e.g. Eur. *Hec.* 70; Eur. *IT* 42; S. *El.* 501; Aesch. *Ag.* 274), but occurrences of these kind are also in Plat. *Leg.* 910 or in Hellenistic poetry, such as Mosch. 2. 21.

¹⁰ P. Chantraine *DELG* s.v. φαίνω. For further considerations on the connection between *phainein* and sight see PRIER 1989 56-64. Although Prier's study is mostly focused on homeric language, most of the arguments he puts forward seem productive for the subject that is addressed in the following pages as well.

¹¹ Despite the indisputable prevalence of sight, this study intends to show that judging φάσματα as simply visual phenomena would be restrictive. For this reason other senses in addition to sight will be taken into account over the next sections.

apparitions have underlined this aspect and it clearly emerges, first of all, from various occurrences of φάσμα in Greek sources¹². The word φάσμα often appears together with verbs of visual perception. Of particular interest are some passages where φάσμα indicates phenomena such as stellar and meteorological events. The main characteristic of these phenomena is that they can largely be perceived through sight. Light, luminescence and brightness appear to be the key words, which underline the connection of these events with vision. A good example of this connotation of φάσμα can be found in Plato, *Politicus*:

ΞΕ. ἦν τοίνυν καὶ ἔτι ἔσται τῶν πάλαι λεχθέντων πολλά τε ἄλλα καὶ δὴ καὶ τὸ περὶ τὴν Ἀτρέως τε καὶ Θυέστου λεχθεῖσαν ἔριν φάσμα. ἀκήκοας γάρ που καὶ ἀπομνημονεύεις ὃ φασι γενέσθαι τότε.

ΝΕ. ΣΩ. τὸ περὶ τῆς χρυσιῆς ἀρνὸς ἴσως σημεῖον φράζεις.

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ΞΕ. οὐδαμῶς, ἀλλὰ τὸ περὶ τῆς μεταβολῆς δύσεώς τε καὶ ἀνατολῆς ἡλίου καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἄστρον, ὡς ἄρα ὅθεν μὲν ἀνατέλλει νῦν εἰς τοῦτον τότε τὸν τόπον ἐδύετο, ἀνέτελλε δ' ἐκ τοῦ ἐναντίου, τότε δὲ δὴ μαρτυρήσας ἄρα ὁ θεὸς Ἀτρεῖ μετέβαλεν αὐτὸ ἐπὶ τὸ νῦν σχῆμα¹³.

In this text, φάσμα is related to the change in the rising and setting of the sun and of the other stars (τὸ περὶ τῆς μεταβολῆς δύσεώς τε καὶ ἀνατολῆς ἡλίου καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἄστρον). Luminescence is evoked throughout the whole passage by the presence of the celestial bodies. The same meaning of φάσμα as a meteorological event recurs also in other texts, and is worth mentioning. For instance, a passage at the beginning of Aristotle's *Meteorologica* ought to be considered:

ταῦτα δ' ἐστὶν ὅσα συμβαίνει κατὰ φύσιν μὲν, ἀτακτοτέραν μὲντοι τῆς τοῦ πρώτου στοιχείου τῶν σωμάτων, περὶ τὸν γεινιῶντα μάλιστα τόπον τῆ φορᾶ τῆ τῶν ἄστρον, οἷον περὶ τε γάλακτος καὶ κομητῶν καὶ τῶν ἐκφυρομένων καὶ κινουμένων φασμάτων, ὅσα τε θείημεν ἂν ἀέρος εἶναι κοινὰ πάθη καὶ ὕδατος [...]¹⁴.

This passage implies that φάσμα is referred to the milky way, to comets and to shooting stars, therefore to a series of phenomena which are perceptible with the eye which belong to the same

¹² Most of the bibliography cited above (n.1) deals with the visual appearance of dreams and εἶδωλα. Moreover, F. FRONTISI-DUCROUX (2006), in her whole article tackles the issue of the figuration and representation of spirits and of other beings which were likely to be considered as normally invisible in ancient Greece. Nevertheless, it has to be kept in mind that Françoise Frontisi-Ducroux mainly focuses on those entities which are most similar to the modern kind of ghosts and not on those central to this research.

¹³ Plat. *Plt.* 268 ε – 269 α: «*Str.*: Many tales have existed and many more will exist concerning ancient. One of those is the portent connected with the tale of the quarrel between Atreus and Thyestes. You have surely heard of it and remember what is said to have happened. | *Y. Soc.*: You refer, I suppose, to the sign of the golden lamb. | *Str.*: Not at all. I refer to the change in the rising and setting of the sun and the other stars, and to how in those times they used to set where they now rise, and used to rise where they now set, but the god at the time of the dispute, you recall, changed all that to the present system to show his favour of Atreus».

¹⁴ Aristot. *Mete.* 338 b 20: «Its (scil. meteorology's) area of interest is everything which happens naturally, but less regularly than material things, and which happens in the region which borders most nearly on the movements of the stars. Such as the milky way, comets, shooting stars and luminescent meteors, phenomena that may be considered as common to air and water [...]

δοκῶ γὰρ αὐτὴν εἰσορῶν γυναῖχ' ὄρᾶν
ἐμήν [...]¹⁹.

Admetus refers to the woman Heracles is bringing towards him, still hidden and veiled, as similar to Alcestis in her μορφή. The verbs he uses to describe his perception are verbs indicating vision, εἰσοράω and ὄράω. Moreover at l. 1064 he refers to her presence before his eyes, ὄμματα. In these lines the very first step of Admetus' identification of Alcestis takes place, and it happens through sight. Nevertheless, despite the neat visual perception Admetus has of the woman's appearance, he is not yet persuaded of her identity and does not recognize the veiled woman as his spouse, except for the resemblance in height and posture²⁰.

Verbs of visual perception recur later in the tragedy as well and refer to Admetus' perception and progressive identification of Alcestis:

HP. σφζέ νυν, καὶ τὸν Διὸς
φήσεις ποτ' εἶναι παῖδα γενναῖον ξένον 1120
βλέψον πρὸς αὐτήν, εἴ τι σῆ δοκεῖ πρέπειν
γυναϊκί: λύπης δ' εὐτυχῶν μεθίστασο.
ΑΔ. ὦ θεοί, τί λέξω; θαῦμ' ἀνέλπιστον τόδε:
γυναῖκα λεύσσω τήνδ' ἐμήν ἐτητύμως,
ἢ κέρτομός μ' ἐκ θεοῦ τις ἐκπλήσσει χαρά; 1125
HP. οὐκ ἔστιν ἄλλη: τήνδ' ὄρᾳς δάμαρτα σήν.
ΑΔ. ὄρα δὲ μή τι φάσμα νερτέρων τόδ' ἦ.
HP. οὐ ψυχαγωγὸν τόνδ' ἐποιήσω ξένον.
ΑΔ. ἀλλ' ἦν ἔθαπτον εἰσορῶ δάμαρτ' ἐμήν²¹;

In this passage, the preponderance of verbs of sight is remarkable and the use which is made of them is redundant and almost pleonastic. Heracles first invites Admetus to look towards her (βλέψον πρὸς αὐτήν), and Admetus replies using the verb λεύσσω. Further on, at l. 1126 ὄράω is employed once more (ὄρᾳς δάμαρτα σήν), and at Admetus echoes Heracles' words with the compound εἰσοράω (εἰσορῶ δάμαρτ' ἐμήν)²². However, although sight prevails in these lines and

¹⁹ Eur. *Alc.* 1061-7: «Woman, whoever you are, know that you are like Alcestis in your shape and that you resemble her in appearance. Oh! Take this woman away from my sight, in the name of the gods, do not finish someone who is dead! When I see her I think of seeing my wife [...]».

²⁰ See for instance PARKER 2007 for a full commentary of these lines.

²¹ Eur. *Alc.* 1119-29: «*Heracles*: Keep her safe and one day you will say that Zeus's son is good guest. Look at her, and see whether she looks like your wife. Let joy take the place of your sadness. | *Admetus*: O gods, what can I say? This is an unexpected wonder. Is this truly my wife I see here, or is some delusive joy sent by a god striking me? | *Heracles*: It is none other: the woman you see here is your wife. | *Admetus*: Is she not some ghost from the Underworld? | *Heracles*: He whom you made your guest is not a necromancer. | *Admetus*: But do I see the wife whom I buried?».

²² At this point of the tragedy it is not clear whether Alcestis is unveiled by Heracles in order to show Admetus her facial features and not barely her figure. PARKER (2007) at 275 along with the other major commentaries argue that Heracles unveils her at l. 1120, just before turning to Admetus and pronouncing: βλέψον πρὸς αὐτήν and inviting him to look towards his wife. Moreover, Parker alludes to the analogies between this passage and the practice of ἀνακαλυπτήρια, that is the practice on the unveiling of the bride during the wedding, which would work perfectly in the plot of the tragedy as a final re-marriage of Admetus with his wife having promised not to marry any other woman. The text does not refer explicitly to the unveiling, nor mentions the fact that Alcestis was previously veiled

although Admetus can clearly see the woman who is in front of him, at l. 1127 he asks Heracles if she is a φάσμα νερτέρων, an illusive apparition who looks like Alcestis and sent to strike him with delusive joy (κέρτομός μ' ἐκ θεοῦ τις ἐκπλήσσει χαρά). This passage enables us to infer two important points concerning the perception of φάσματα: the first is that φάσματα can be perceived clearly through sight, since after having seen her Admetus considers her likely to be a φάσμα. Secondly, Admetus' hesitation before the woman he is clearly perceiving with his eyes informs us that sight is evidently not sufficient to tell the difference between a phantom and a human being. Admetus recognizes his wife, he looks towards her and sees that she looks like the real Alcestis but, still, he thinks she is an illusory φάσμα sent by the gods.

Another text strengthens the idea that sight is not enough to distinguish phantoms from reality is a passage from Euripides' *Helen*:

ME. τίς εἶ; τίς ὄψιν σὴν, γύναι, προσδέρκομαι;
 EL. σὺ δ' εἶ τίς; αὐτὸς γὰρ σὲ κάμ' ἔχει λόγος.
 ME. οὐπώποτ' εἶδον προσφερέστερον δέμας.
 EL. ὦ θεοί: θεὸς γὰρ καὶ τὸ γινώσκειν φίλους. 560
 ME. Ἑλληνίς εἶ τις ἢ ἐπιχωρία γυνή;
 EL. Ἑλληνίς: ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸ σὸν θέλω μαθεῖν.
 ME. Ἑλένη σ' ὁμοίαν δὴ μάλιστ' εἶδον, γύναι²³.

Once again, as in the *Alcestis*, Euripides stages a scene which shows the relationship between humans and apparitions. This text is rich with words related to vision and sight. Menelaus, after spending several years with Helen's double, finds himself face to face with his real wife and struggles to understand who she is. He thinks his spouse, the one whom he has brought from Phrygia, is waiting for him in a cave²⁴. The verbs and phrases involved in the interaction between Menelaus and Helen are largely related to sight, too (l.557; l.559, l.563), and recur also in the following lines of the tragedy (l.570; l.575; l.576; l.578; l.580):

ME. ὦ φωσφόρ' Ἐκάτη, πέμπε φάσματ' εὐμενῆ.
 EL. οὐ νυκτίφαντον πρόπολον Ἐνοδίας μ' ὄρᾳς 570
 ME. οὐ μὴν γυναικῶν γ' εἶς δυοῖν ἔφυν πόσις.
 EL. ποίων δὲ λέκτρων δεσπότης ἄλλων ἔφους;
 ME. ἦν ἄντρα κεύθει κάκ Φρυγῶν κομίζομαι.

either. We can assume that she was veiled - and eventually unveiled - on the basis of Admetus' hesitation in recognizing her. Iconographic evidence comes to aid as well, as Alcestis is often depicted led by Heracles and clearly hidden by a veil (*LIMC* I s.v. Alkestis n. 30; 58; 62). Moreover, reference to the wedding ritual appears perfectly coherent with the hymenaial elements which recur in earlier in the tragedy (Eur. *Alc.* ll. 866-7, 880-1, 898-9, 915-25). For a thorough account of the elements recalling wedding and especially unveiling in tragedy see SEAFORD 1987. Despite this, it is also possible that the series of verbs of vision and sight contained in the following lines, along with Admetus seeing clearly Alcestis' features, simply refer him turning to look towards her while he was looking away before (l. 1118 and the analogy drawn with the unbearable sight of the Gorgon).

²³ Eur. *Hel.* 557-63: «*Menelaus*: Who are you? What image of you do I look at? | *Helen*: And you, who are you? You and I have both the same question. | *Menelaus*: I have never seen anyone looking so alike! | *Helen*: O gods! Seeing the dear ones is something divine! | *Menelaus*: Are you a Greek woman or a native here? | *Helen*: Greek. But I want to know about you aswell. | *Menelaus*: Woman, you look more like Helen than anyone I have ever seen».

²⁴ Eur. *Hel.* 573.

ΕΛ. οὐκ ἔστιν ἄλλη σὴ τις ἀντ' ἐμοῦ γυνή.
 ΜΕ. οὐ που φρονῶ μὲν εὖ, τὸ δ' ὄμμα μου νοσεῖ; 575
 ΕΛ. οὐ γάρ με λεύσσω σὴν δάμαρθ' ὄραν δοκεῖς;
 ΜΕ. τὸ σῶμ' ὅμοιον, τὸ δὲ σαφές μ' ἀποστερεῖ.
 ΕΛ. σκέψαι: τί σοῦνδεῖ; τίς δὲ σοῦ σοφώτερος;
 ΜΕ. ἔοικας: οὗτοι τοῦτό γ' ἐξαρνήσομαι.
 ΕΛ. τίς οὖν διδάξει σ' ἄλλος ἢ τὰ σ' ὄμματα²⁵; 580

Moreover, there are further similarities between this text and the passage of the *Alcestis* where she is slowly identified by Admetus. Menelaus, just as Admetus in the *Alcestis*, seems unable to recognize the woman as his real spouse²⁶. He therefore invokes Hekate, dreading her φάσματα²⁷ just as Admetus suspected to be deceived by the gods with an illusory vision (φάσμα νεπτέρων)²⁸. Neither can rely on the senses and on perception alone: Admetus needs to be informed and reassured by Heracles, and Menelaus by a servant on the real identity of their wives whom they think, respectively, dead and hidden in a cave²⁹.

Another text which helps us to focus on the importance of visual perception vis-à-vis φάσματα and the possibility of sight being mistaken and deceived, is in Herodotus' *Histories*:

ὥς με ἠγάγετο Ἀρίστων ἐς ἐωυτοῦ, νυκτὶ τρίτῃ ἀπὸ τῆς πρώτης ἤλθέ μοι φάσμα εἰδόμενον Ἀρίστωνι, συνευνηθὲν δὲ τοὺς στεφάνους τοὺς εἶχε ἐμοὶ περιετίθειε. [2] καὶ τὸ μὲν οἰχώκεε, ἦκε δὲ μετὰ ταῦτα Ἀρίστων. ὥς δέ με εἶδε ἔχουσαν στεφάνους, εἰρώτα τίς εἶη μοι ὁ δούς: ἐγὼ δὲ ἐφάμην ἐκεῖνον, ὁ δὲ οὐκ ὑπεδέκετο. ἐγὼ δὲ κατωμνύμην φαμένη αὐτὸν οὐ ποιεῖν καλῶς ἀπαρνεόμενον: ὀλίγω γὰρ τι πρότερον ἐλθόντα καὶ συνευνηθέντα δοῦναί μοι τοὺς στεφάνους³⁰.

²⁵ Eur. *Hel.* 569-80: «*Menelaus*: O torch-bearer Hekate, send me benign apparitions! | *Helen*: You are not in front of a nightly servant of Enodia. | *Menelaus*: But I have not married two women. | *Helen*: Of what other wife are you lord and master? | *Menelaus*: She is in a cave, I brought her from Troy. | *Helen*: You have no other wife but me. | *Menelaus*: Can I be sane in the mind but ill in the eyes? | *Helen*: In seeing me are you not convinced of seeing your wife? | *Menelaus*: You are alike in the figure, but this is not clear to me. | *Helen*: Look: what more do you need? How can it be clearer to you? | *Menelaus*: You look like her: I cannot deny it. | *Helen*: Who can teach you better than your own eyes?».

²⁶ The copy of Helen made by Hera had, of course, exactly the same physical features of the original, despite being made of thin air (Eur. *Hel.* 31-4). The fact that it could be touched and perceived with senses other than sight enhances the extraordinary nature of this double, made of air and nonetheless tangible. The exceptional resemblance between the two figures engenders Menelaus' amazement and along with the resulting struggle to recognize his real spouse. For thorough considerations concerning the variant of the myth where Helen never follows Paris to Troy but is doubled and for the tradition of this version see GENTILI 1984, 178; CERRI 1993, pp. 329-45; BETTINI-BRILLANTE 2002, pp. 132-57.

²⁷ Eur. *Hel.* 569. It is necessary to point out that Helen's double is not defined as φάσμα in the text. The only occasion where the word occurs is in this line, and it refers not to the double itself but to a potential being sent by Hekate to Menelaus and whose presence he dreads. The mention of Hekate is on the other hand very important in relation to the connection between φάσματα, vision and light: the epithet used for the goddess is, in fact, the torch-bearer, and the torch is one of her distinctive features. see FRANCO 2003 p. 217 and ZOGRAFOU 2010.

²⁸ Eur. *Alc.* 1127 and *supra*.

²⁹ Eur. *Alc.* 1126; 1128; 1132; Eur. *Hel.* 605-21.

³⁰ Hdt. 6. 69. 1: «On the third night after the first on which Ariston had brought me to his house, an apparition who looked like Ariston visited me, lay with me, and put the garlands which he had around me. Once he left, the real Ariston came to me. When he saw the garlands that I had, he asked me who had given them; I said it was him, but he denied it. Then I said, and swore it, that by denying it he did not do well, since, a little earlier he had come and lain with me and given me the garlands».

The passage tells the story of the birth of Demaratus, the Eurypontid king of Sparta. His mother, when visited by a phantom looking just like her husband (φάσμα εἰδόμενον Ἀρίστωνι) is unable to tell the difference between the two, and mistakes the φάσμα for the real Ariston. Therefore, what happens is exactly the opposite of what occurred to Admetus and Menelaus who took their real spouses for illusory phenomena. In Herodotus as well as in Euripides, sight – although accurate – is not enough to distinguish a φάσμα from a real human being and vice versa.

From these texts, another important element related to φάσματα and how they were conceived in ancient Greek thought can be detected. In all the cases cited, φάσματα represent and make visible something which could not otherwise be present to the audience's eyes. In the case of Plato's *Politicus* what is being reported is an unusual and naturally impossible behaviour of the sun and the stars. The same happens in Aristotle's *Meteorologica*, where peculiar phenomena involving celestial bodies are defined as φάσματα. Something analogous also happens to Ariston's wife, although in a different context. She thinks she is seeing her husband who is not actually there in that precise moment. This particular feature characterizing φάσματα is the reason why Admetus thinks Alcestis is not a real human being. He thinks she is dead, and therefore does not believe her presence possible at that moment. A φάσμα could, on the other hand, take her appearance and make her visible to him³¹.

2. TOUCH

Vision is not the only sense involved in the perception of supernatural phenomena in the ancient world, however. There are a large number of ancient sources dealing with φάσματα where other senses play a significant role as well, including Euripides' *Alcestis*. At l. 1060, Admetus is for the first time face to face with the veiled woman Heracles is bringing on stage and whom he cannot recognize as his wife, except for her shape and height, which he says are similar to Alcestis'³². Along with sight, the other sense that plays a key role in the process through which Admetus identifies Alcestis is touch. To fully understand the importance of each sense the best way to study Admetus' relationship with the woman is to follow the progressive identification, which takes place at lines 1114:

ΑΔ. οὐκ ἂν θίγοιμι: δῶμα δ' εἰσελθεῖν πάρα.

HP. τῆ σῆ πέποιθα χειρὶ δεξιᾷ μόνη.

1115

ΑΔ. ἄναξ, βιάζῃ μ' οὐ θέλοντα δρᾶν τάδε.

HP. τόλμα προτεῖναι χεῖρα καὶ θιγεῖν ξένης.

ΑΔ. καὶ δὴ προτείνω,

HP. Γοργόν' ὡς κατατομῶν.

³¹ This peculiarity of φάσματα is perfectly exemplified in Euripides' *Ion*, at lines 1354 and 1395. In both lines φάσμα is referred to a real and material object or being: in the first case the cradle which the Pythia gives Ion; in the second case Ion himself who visits his mother. The recipients – in the first case Ion and Creusa in the second – use the term φάσμα in a metaphorical sense: it is meant to define something which, for the recipient, is totally unexpected. Something which is so unreal to their eyes that it can only be explained as a φάσμα. Although the context is totally different from Euripides' *Alcestis*, the use and the meaning of the word φάσμα overlap, in particular regarding its relationship with the recipient(s).

³² Eur. *Alc.* 1063 and *supra*.

ἔχεις;
 ΑΔ. ἔχω³³.

Before even seeing her, Admetus refuses to touch Alcestis and to take her into his house. He thinks she is some other woman, different from his wife. Very direct reference is made to touch (l. 114; l. 117; l. 118), especially when - obeying Heracles' demands - Admetus stretches his hand out towards the woman. He touches her and seizes her hand: he says ἔχω (l. 119).

Despite this, and despite the previously acknowledged resemblance with his wife, Admetus is still unsure of the woman's identity. It is only after Heracles' further reassurance that Admetus finally asks if he can touch her and address her as if she were alive:

ΑΔ. θίγω, προσείπω ζῶσαν ὡς δάμαρτ' ἐμήν;
 ΗΡ. πρόσειπ': ἔχεις γὰρ πᾶν ὅσονπερ ἤθελες.
 ΑΔ. ὃ φιλτάτης γυναικὸς ὄμμα καὶ δέμας,
 ἔχω σ' ἀέπτως, οὔποτ' ὄψεσθαι δοκῶν³⁴.

From Admetus' question: θίγω, προσείπω ζῶσαν ὡς δάμαρτ' ἐμήν (l. 113) we can infer that the kind of behaviour which is suitable for humans interacting with φάσματα is different from the normal behaviour humans have with each other during ordinary communicative interactions. So far, textual evidence has shown that physical appearance, as perceived through sight, does not make the difference between phantoms and humans. It is worth investigating, as a second step of this analysis of sensory perception, if touch does permit one to identify this difference. Moreover, can Admetus' words at l.1131 imply that real Alcestis is tangible while a phantom would not be³⁵? In order to address this matter lines 118-9 should be considered once again and stress must be laid on the portion of the text where touch is more directly mentioned, that is, when Admetus obeys Heracles' requests and takes hold of Alcestis' hand³⁶.

Of the utmost importance is that, after seizing the woman, at l. 1127 Admetus still suspects that she is a phantom. According to this passage, neither sight, nor tactile perception are enough to distinguish illusory phenomena from real human beings. In fact, the possibility of taking hold of the woman's hand still does not persuade Admetus of her bodily reality. Therefore, it can be argued that φάσματα might have a bodily reality and may be perceptible

³³ Eur. *Alc.* 114-9: «Admetus: I will not touch her. But let her into the house. | Heracles: I trust only your right hand. | Admetus: Master, you force me into doing this against my will. | Heracles: Have the courage to stretch out your hand and touch the stranger. | Admetus: There, I stretch it out | Heracles: as though beheading the Gorgon. Do you have her? | Admetus: Yes, I have her».

³⁴ Eur. *Alc.* 1131-4: «Admetus: Can I touch her and address her as my living wife? | Heracles: Address her. You have what you desire. | Admetus: O face and shape of my dear wife, I unexpectedly have you back, while I thought I would not see you again!».

³⁵ The topic of the corporeity of phantoms is addressed by STRAMAGLIA (1999) at 42-3, although he does not focus only on φάσμα but gives instead a general account of the different ways tactile perception could be experienced by humans on phantoms and other supernatural beings.

³⁶ Eur. *Alc.* 118-9.

with touch just as they are with sight³⁷.

Other examples can be mentioned, in addition to this passage, suggesting the physical reality of φάσματα. This is the case, once again, of Ariston's wife in Herodotus VI 69.1: she is visited by a φάσμα looking just like her husband and whom she has sexual intercourse with. It is evident that sight is not the only sense involved in the interaction, if she spent the night with the φάσμα and still mistook him for the real Ariston. Moreover, the woman soon gave birth to Demaratus³⁸, proving that a φάσμα not only can be perceived through vision and touch, but can also generate offspring, thus having the same bodily reality as human beings³⁹.

3. HEARING AND VERBAL INTERACTION

From these texts we can infer a further point which brings us closer to the clarification of how φάσματα were conceived and represented in classical Greece. Apparently, they were imagined as beings which could be entirely material and bodily and which could be perceived through sight and touch. In this final section I address whether there any other senses involved in Admetus perception and process of identification. How can the reality of Alcestis be certified at the end of Euripides' drama? And, in a broader perspective, are there any possible ways to trace boundaries between phantoms and real human beings?

Within the last episode of the *Alcestis*, line l. 1131 seems of particular importance. Along with θίγω, which refers to touch, Admetus asks Heracles προσείπω ὡς ζῶσαν⁴⁰? Admetus therefore alludes to a possible verbal interaction between him and Alcestis. After being encouraged by Heracles' πρόσσειπε (l. 1132) he addresses his wife for the first time, recognizing her as alive and attempting to establish communication with her. It is finally clear to him that Alcestis is not a φάσμα but a human being. The definition *LSJ* gives for the verb προσειπεῖν is: *to speak to one, to address*⁴¹, which exactly describes what Admetus does at l. 1133, by using the vocative case to address Alcestis: ὦ φιλάτης γυναικὸς ὄμμα καὶ δέμας. It is only when Heracles encourages him to directly address Alcestis that Admetus is persuaded of her reality.

There are in fact several sources which actually show a verbal interaction taking place between a φάσμα and a human being⁴², and which entail that φάσματα produce sounds and

³⁷ These lines also emphasize the highly dramatic moment Admetus is living. The woman, whom he had seen dead and whom he had buried, is progressively acquiring the reality and substance of the real Alcestis and the process is accompanied by both, Heracles' words and Admetus' sensory perception.

³⁸ Hdt. 6. 68-9.

³⁹ It is, in fact, a bodily reality which is even more effective than a human one and is paired with a very strong agency of the φάσμα. Most of the cases which involve phantoms generating children result in the birth of a hero or of a particularly gifted being. Similar cases are those of Heracles, born from the union of Alcmene and Zeus; of Servius Tullius (D.H. 4. 1.3-2.4) or of Romulus and Remus who according to a version of the myth (Promathion ΙΣΤΟΡΙΑ ΙΤΑΛΙΚΗ III 202 = Plut. *Rom.* 2.4-6) were born from the union of a φάσμα with a servant. For a study of the whole story of Alcmene and of the birth of Heracles see BETTINI 1998; for the crosscultural topic of a powerful double giving birth to extraordinary children BETTINI 2012, pp. 39-59.

⁴⁰ Eur. *Alc.* 1131.

⁴¹ *LSJ* s.v. προσείπω.

⁴² STRAMAGLIA (1999) at 44-7 deals with the theme of the voice of phantoms: he remarks that apparitions – in the case of dead and ψυχαὶ are frequently associated with feeble and screeching sounds (e.g. τρίζω) or depicted as silent. Despite this a number of cases where phantoms have loud and powerful voices is attested as well. This idea is confirmed by the texts I will take as examples in the following pages.

have voices humans can hear. A good example is in Pindar, *Olympian VIII*:

γλαυκοὶ δὲ δράκοντες, ἐπεὶ κτίσθη νέον,
 πύργον ἐσαλλόμενοι τρεῖς, οἱ δύο μὲν κάπετον,
 αὔθι δ' ἀτυζομένω ψυχὰς βάλλον,
 εἷς δ' ἀνόρουσε βοάσαις. 40
 ἔννεπε δ' ἀντίον ὀρμαίνων τέρας εὐθὺς, Ἀπόλλων·
 'Πέργαμος ἀμφὶ τεαῖς, ἦρωσ, χερὸς ἐργασίαι ἀλίσκεται·
 ὧς ἐμοὶ φάσμα λέγει Κρονίδα
 πεμφθὲν βαρυδούπου Διός⁴³.

Three serpents appear on the walls of Troy, and the event is defined as φάσμα at l. 44. Of the three serpents, two collapse, while the third rises emitting loud and inarticulate sounds (ἀνόρουσε βοάσαις).

Another case in which φάσματα are accompanied by similar sounds is in Herodotus' *Histories*:

[...] τὰ δὲ δὴ ἐπὶ τούτῳ δεύτερα ἐπιγενόμενα καὶ διὰ πάντων φασμάτων ἄξια θαμάσαι μάλιστα.
 [3] ἐπεὶ γὰρ δὴ ἦσαν ἐπιόντες οἱ βάρβαροι κατὰ τὸ ἶρον τῆς Προναίης Ἀθηναίης, ἐν τούτῳ ἐκ
 μὲν τοῦ οὐρανοῦ κεραυνοὶ αὐτοῖσι ἐνέπιπτον, ἀπὸ δὲ τοῦ Παρνησοῦ ἀπορραγεῖσαι δύο
 κορυφαὶ ἐφέροντο πολλῶ πατάγῳ ἐς αὐτοὺς καὶ κατέβαλον συχνούς σφρων, ἐκ δὲ τοῦ ἱροῦ
 τῆς Προναίης βοή τε καὶ ἀλαλαγμὸς ἐγένετο⁴⁴.

When the barbarians approach the temple of Athena Pronaia in Delphi, astounding φάσματα happen. Bolts of lightning fall on the intruders, a landslide falls from Mount Parnassus and strong, resounding noises can be heard (βοή τε καὶ ἀλαλαγμὸς ἐγένετο). The vocabulary used to describe these inarticulate sounds is analogous in the two texts, and they both indicate the sound as βοή.

Moreover, these two examples are significant since they give proof that φάσματα can be seen, touched and heard as well, because they have got voices and usually appear accompanied by sounds and noises. But these deductions concerning the sound of phantoms can be taken further, because there are other examples which show that utterances coming from φάσματα can not only be articulate, but can also have communicative intentions.

Evidence of this can be found in Herodotus, book four, when Aristeas' φάσμα visits the inhabitants of Metapontum, in Italy, and orders them to erect an altar and a statue for the god Apollo:

⁴³ Pind. *Ol.* 8. 37-44: «When the wall was newly-built, three blue-gray snakes tried to jump upon the tower: two fell down and, stricken by terror, lost their lives on the spot, but one leapt in with loud cries. Apollo considered the adverse omen and immediately said: "Hero, Pergamos is to be captured, from where your hand is working – this is what the apparition sent by the son of Kronos, loudly thundering Zeus, tells me"».

⁴⁴ Hdt. 8. 37. 2-3: «But the prodigy which followed was more wondrous than anything ever seen. For when the advancing enemies were drawing closer to the temple of Athena Pronaea, they were hit by lightning from above and two peaks broke off from Mount Parnassus, tumbling upon them with a loud noise and hitting many of them; and from the temple of the goddess Pronaea there came a shout and clamour of triumph».

Μεταποντῖνοι φασὶ αὐτὸν Ἀριστείην φανέντα σφι ἐς τὴν χώραν κελεύσαι βωμὸν Ἀπόλλωνος ἰδρύσασθαι καὶ Ἀριστέω τοῦ Προκοννησίου ἐπωνυμίην ἔχοντα ἀνδριάντα παρ' αὐτὸν ἰστάναι: φάναί γάρ σφι τὸν Ἀπόλλωνα Ἰταλιωτέων μούνοισι δὴ ἀπικέσθαι ἐς τὴν χώραν, καὶ αὐτὸς οἱ ἔπεσθαι ὁ νῦν ἐὼν Ἀριστεύς: τότε δὲ, ὅτε εἶπετο τῷ θεῷ, εἶναι κόραξ. [3] καὶ τὸν μὲν εἰπόντα ταῦτα ἀφανισθῆναι, σφέας δὲ Μεταποντῖνοι λέγουσι ἐς Δελφοὺς πέμψαντας τὸν θεὸν ἐπειρωτῶν ὃ τι τὸ φάσμα τοῦ ἀνθρώπου εἶη. τὴν δὲ Πυθίην σφέας κελεύειν πείθεσθαι τῷ φάσματι, πειθομένοισι δὲ ἄμεινον συνοίσεσθαι. καὶ σφέας δεξαμένους ταῦτα ποιῆσαι ἐπιτελέα⁴⁵.

The verb Herodotus uses to define Aristeas' action of giving orders is *κελεύω*, which indicates a verbal and articulate request. Moreover, Aristeas' utterance, although not quoted as direct speech, can be classified as a form of instructional language. The interlocutor (in this case the Metapontines) does not reply to the utterance and has no possibility to do so, given that Aristeas vanishes immediately after pronouncing his words. According to Roman Jakobson's theory of language, Aristeas' words are an example of the use of language that is defined as *conative*. The utterance is totally focused on the addressee, whom the locutor addresses with the aim of giving a set of instructions and/or orders⁴⁶. In addition, the verb *κελεύω*, which Herodotus uses to describe Aristeas' act, corresponds to the most representative form of the conative function of language, that is the imperative mood.

The same verb, in its compound *διακελεύω*, recurs in another passage of Herodotus' *Histories*, and that is when – during the battle of Salamina – the *φάσμα* of a woman⁴⁷ appears to the Athenians and urges them with a loud voice not to give up the fight:

λέγεται δὲ καὶ τάδε, ὡς φάσμα σφι γυναικὸς ἐφάνη, φανεῖσαν δὲ διακελεύεσθαι ὥστε καὶ ἅπαν ἀκοῦσαι τὸ τῶν Ἑλλήνων στρατόπεδον, ὄνειδίσασαν πρότερον τάδε, ᾧ δαιμόνιοι, μέχρι κόσου ἔτι πρύμνην ἀνακρούεσθε;⁴⁸

The latter case represents another outstanding example of the conative function of language used by a *φάσμα* while addressing mortals. In this case, just as in the previous one, it is the phantom who speaks first addressing the human beings, not vice versa. Also, in both cases, the absence of an articulate dialogue before the vanishing of the phantom is remarkable. According

⁴⁵ Hdt. 4. 15. 2-3: «The Metapontines tell that Aristeas appeared in their region and bade them to set up an altar to Apollo and, beside it, a statue bearing the name of Aristeas the Proconnesian; he claimed that Apollo had appeared, among all the Greeks of Italy, only in their country, and that he himself – who was now Aristeas, but when he followed the god had once been a crow – had come with him. Once he said this, he disappeared. The Metapontines say that they sent messengers to Delphi to ask the god what was the meaning of the apparition of the man; and the Pythian priestess bade them to obey the vision, saying that their fortune would be better; once they received this answer they did as they were advised to».

⁴⁶ JAKOBSON 1960, p. 355.

⁴⁷ According to most commentaries she is to be identified with the goddess Athena (see also Plut. *Them.* 12. 1 for the episode).

⁴⁸ Hdt. 8. 84. 2: «It is also said that the apparition of a woman occurred to them, and appearing she shouted out orders loud enough for all the Greek fleet to hear, uttering first this reproach, "Poor men, how long will you still be backing water?». Moreover in this passage the voice of the *φάσμα* is specifically defined as loud so that all of the Athenians could hear it. This appearance therefore belongs to the category of those having strong and effective voices and not to those emitting inarticulate sounds.

to literary sources of archaic and classical age, mortals – when involved in communication with φάσματα - seem to be mere recipients and their level of agency during the interaction is very low. A study of the turn-taking system which distinguishes the interactions between human beings and phantoms in most ancient sources also results in the deduction that mortals never address φάσματα directly or establish articulate and complex communication with them. On the contrary, they merely listen to and obey the instructions and orders they receive from phantoms without establishing a proper dialogue⁴⁹.

On the other hand, *Alcestis* can be addressed by Admetus directly and with the vocative case. Therefore, the interaction taking place between the two characters from line 1133 onwards appears radically different when compared to the interaction that, according to textual evidence cited above, normally occurs between a φάσμα and a human being. Admetus, by addressing his wife as he does, is allowed to make use of language and of communicative strategies in a way that could not be possible with a phantom as interlocutor.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on select examples of cultural representations of φάσματα in classical Greek literature and poetry, some features common to these phenomena and to the way they were imagined in the ancient world come more clearly into view. Particular stress has been laid on the sensory elements which characterize φάσματα, in order to study the first and most immediate type of relationship that was thought to exist between them and mortals.

The passages that have been taken into account, and especially the last episode of Euripides' *Alcestis*, prove that the difference between φάσματα and real human beings is intended as not perceivable with the senses and does not appear to be related to sensory experience. Φάσματα have an extremely strong visual impact on their "recipients": many times they come as stellar phenomena, meteorological events, or even flames or pure fire. The perceptions humans have of them is usually described with abundance of verbs indicating visual perception. However, textual evidence shows that φάσματα can also be touched, their voices be heard, and that they can also generate children as proper human beings do. In several cases φάσματα can even be more powerful and more effective than humans themselves from a physical point of view (this is the case of φάσματα which give birth to specially gifted or extraordinary beings).

To look into the difference between φάσματα and real human beings another approach might be required and the point of view of pragmatic linguistics could be appropriate in this context. If attention is paid to communicative dynamics and especially on speech turns, the type of interaction involving φάσματα seems different from any ordinary communication involving

⁴⁹ In this context it is impossible for me to give an exhaustive account of the occurrences which give evidence of this. An accurate analysis of the occurrences of the word φάσμα in the sources of archaic and classical age has nevertheless shown that there are no cases where humans establish communication or lead the interaction. They always, independently from the context which the interaction takes place in, are mere recipients. That is, they react and respond but never autonomously address φάσματα, nor take part in an extended and articulate verbal exchange. For a discussion about the theory of agency applied to linguistics and for the roles of agents and recipients during communicative interactions see, among others, AHEARN 2001 and DURANTI 2007, p. 101.

humans. In fact, as some texts reveal, humans do not usually address φάσματα directly and a complex verbal interaction between them is not engaged. On the contrary, the role of mortals is limited to obeying and responding to what φάσματα ask for, while φάσματα use language mainly in its conative function, that is to convey instructions or brief communications, and by using imperatives and vocatives⁵⁰. In the last episode of Euripides' *Alcestis*, the communicative interaction between Admetus and veiled Alcestis can therefore be read and reconsidered from this point of view. Admetus realizes that Alcestis is real and not a φάσμα νεπτέρων from the moment when Heracles authorizes him to address her with a vocative. The latter is, in fact, the mood mostly related to the conative function of language, hence typical of the way φάσματα would use language during an interaction with mortals, and not vice versa. The fact that Admetus can take the first speech turn, establish communication and address her directly as he would do with his real wife⁵¹, persuades him – together with the reader- the Alcestis is not a φάσμα but an authentic living human being.

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⁵⁰ JAKOBSON 1960, p. 355 and *supra*.

⁵¹ Once again, the poetic aspect of the passage must also be considered: when Admetus asks whether he can address the woman as his living wife, surprised exclamations and loving terms are of course implied in addition to the linguistic use of the imperative mood (ll. 1133-1134: «O face and shape of my dear wife, I unexpectedly have you back, while I thought I would not see you again!»).

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