

## The Invention of Agathon: Orientation in Fragments

This paper seeks to engage principles of orientation through the application of queer theory and critical readings of gender to the fragments and testimonia of the 5<sup>th</sup> century tragedian Agathon. While images of the poet are historically clouded by his depictions in Plato and Aristophanes, as well as suggestion and allusion in the later work of Aelian, the surviving fragments of Agathon's texts have been underappreciated in terms of their unique construction and placement of gender. This has led to a devaluation of the poet's contribution to the larger contextualization of studies queering Athenian tragedy, particularly in comparison with his contemporary Euripides. Rather than reconstructing an identity from those secondary sources and mimetics, this paper seeks to employ the fragments of Agathon and testimonia which corroborate an image of the artist as a self-authoring and possibly subversive figure that in both social and erotic poetics provides an epistemology and prototype of modern identities travelling under the sign of "queer".

My research begins with a close reading of the extant fragments of Agathon's *Thyestes*, preserved by Athenaeus in the *Deipnosophistae*. This fragment draws a unique etymological source for the Kouretes, in which Agathon imagines a complex, gendered orientation of desire that centers on *τροφή*, itself a complicated word with multiple valences, illustrating "how 'what' we think 'from' is an orientation device" (Ahmed 2006). I argue that Agathon, in rendering the Kouretes as already possessing this quality of *τροφή*, creates an orientation for them in which they "think 'from'" a perspective already colored by that *τροφή*; and therefore the question arises what such thinking orientates them *towards*. Critical to Agathon's placement of gender is also his reference to *ποθεινὸν χρῆμα*, the "extraordinary thing" that is "desirable"- an object the

Kouretes are or have been oriented towards. I offer two interpretations: 1) that the Kouretes' *action* of cutting their long hair, and thus the cutting away of τρυφή, may be a desirable thing as well as the site of etymological origin; or 2) that the τρυφή *itself* constitutes the “extraordinary thing”, and thus is a desirable quality. Thus the etymology of the name, as Agathon traces it, has the queer potential to question the orientation of desire every time it is used, and to continually redraw the boundaries of what is and is not appropriately desirable for a “masculine” subject.

I continue with an examination of the “effeminate” quality of Agathon’s music as well as his involvement in the New Music movement and innovations in composition, specifically *ἐμβόλιμα*, or choral interludes with narrative material possibly unrelated to the plot of the play. I examine arguments for and against Agathon and Euripides as the innovators of these forms (West 1992) and the Byzantine treatise *On Tragedy* attributed to Michael Psellus; I also draw queer comparisons between the advent of New Music and the New Narrative movement of the 1970’s and 80’s (Bradway, 2021). Through this comparison, I emphasize the relationality of Agathon’s use of *ἐμβόλιμα* in context with his parody in Aristophanes’ *Thesmophoriazusae* (Austin & Olson 2004, Muecke 1982). I offer the theory that the attribution of *ἐμβόλιμα* to Agathon suggests a hypermasculine, phallic valence to the innovation of the poet that directly contrasts the famous effeminacy in his image as constructed by Aristophanes, possibly by way of reclamation. I argue therefore that this must lead us to a queer rejection of any binary assertions of the poet’s character.

## Bibliography

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