1-1-2001

Agathon, Essentialism, and Gender Subversion in Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae*

Anne Duncan

*University of Nebraska - Lincoln*, aduncan4@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/classicsfacpub](http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/classicsfacpub)

Part of the [Classics Commons](http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/classicsfacpub)


[http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/classicsfacpub/83](http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/classicsfacpub/83)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Classics and Religious Studies at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications, Classics and Religious Studies Department by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.
Agathon, Essentialism, and Gender Subversion in Aristophanes’ *Thesmophoriazusae*

Anne Duncan
*University of Texas – Austin*

In Aristophanes’ *Thesmophoriazusae*, the women of Athens, infuriated by Euripides’ too-accurate portrayals of lustful and treacherous women, are plotting against him. Euripides and his kinsman come up with a plan to dress the kinsman in women’s clothes and send him into the women’s meeting as a spy. In order to dress the kinsman up, they stop at the house of Agathon, a notoriously effeminate tragic playwright, and ask to borrow some of his women’s clothing and personal grooming items. The “robing scene” with Agathon has often been taken to be a straightforward, if devastating, mockery of a historical figure’s peculiarities. The figure of Agathon in this comedy, however, serves a far more complicated function: he is a site for the investigation of identity, and in particular for the degree to which the self has an essential and stable nature.

Agathon is depicted in this play as fundamentally indeterminate: effeminate, neither fully male nor fully female, not grounded in a stable, recognizable body. He puts into question the distinctions between poet and work, actor and role, masculine and feminine, body and costume. At the same time that he destabilizes boundaries and seems to point toward the idea of identity as constructed, however, he also insists on a kind of essentialism. The tension between the two theories of identity implied by Agathon’s portrayal in the play is ex-
pressed within the play by Agathon’s two theories of mimesis. As we will see, Agathon’s “essentialism” proves to be as subversive of Athenian gender ideology as his “constructionism.”

In a re-working of the scene between Dicaeopolis and Euripides in the Acharnians,1 Euripides and his kinsman in the Thesmophoriazusae go to Agathon’s house to borrow a disguise from the playwright. The entrance of Agathon’s servant sets the tone for the rest of the scene: he describes his master’s poetic activity in elevated language, while the kinsman interrupts him with derisive comments about Agathon’s sexual behavior (50, 57, 59-62). Agathon is wheeled out on the ekkyclema,2 arrayed in women’s clothing, singing the lines of a female character (or chorus leader) and a female chorus.3 His lyrical performance throws the kinsman into a whirl of desire – and blunt comic confusion. The kinsman first compliments and then interrogates Agathon:

ως ἢδυ τὸ μέλος ὦ πότνιαι Γενετυλλίδες
cā θηλυδριώδες καὶ κατεγλωττισμένον
καὶ μανδαλωτόν, Ὄστ’ ἐμοῦ γ’άκρωμένου
ὑπὸ τὴν ἔδραν αὐτὴν ὑπήλθε γάργαλος.
καὶ σ’ ὦ νεανίσχ’ δόσις εἴ, κατ’ Αἰσχύλον
ἐκ τῆς Λυκουργεταίς ἐρέσθαι βουλομαί.
pοδατός ὁ γύννις; τίς πάτρα; τίς ἡ στολή;
tίς ἡ τάραξες τοῦ βίου; τί βάρβιτος
λαλεὶ κροκωττῷ; τί δε λύρα κεκρυφάλω;
tί λήκυθος καὶ στρόφινον; ως οὐ ξύμφορον.
tίς δαί κατόπτρου καὶ ξίφους κοινωνία;
tίς δ’αὐτός ὀ παι; πότερον ως ἀνήρ τρέφει;
καὶ ποὺ πέος; ποὺ χλαίνα; ποῦ Δακωνικαί;
αλλ’ ως γυνὴ δήτ’ εἴτα ποῦ τὰ τιτθία;
tί φής; τί σιγάς; ἀλλὰ δήτ’ ἐκ τοῦ μέλους
ζητῶ σ’, ἔπειδὴ γ’αὐτός οὐ βούλει φράζαι;
(130-45)

By the goddess of my birth-hour, what a sweet song!
how effeminate, how french-kissing,
how lascivious, as I listened to it
a tickle went up my fundament!
And you, O youth, I want to ask you who you are
as Aeschylus does in the Lycurgus plays.

"Whence comes this woman-man? What is its fatherland, what is its raiment?"

What is this disturbance of life? What does a barbiton babble to a saffron gown? What can a lyre say to a hair-net? What’s an oil-flask doing with a bra? How incongruous!

And what association can there be between a mirror and a sword?

And you, boy, were you raised as a man? Then where’s your dick? Where’s your cloak? Where are your Laconian shoes?

Or was it as a woman, then? Then where are your tits? What do you say? Why are you silent? Or shall I find you out from your song, since you yourself don’t want to speak?

Aristophanes presents Agathon as an ontological puzzle for the kinsman. He is dressed as a woman but has no false breasts; he seems to lack the usual stage phallus of comedy as well; he has both “masculine” and “feminine” objects lying around him, both mirror and sword. He is not, or not only, a drag queen, tempting though the label is to apply. He is a disrupter of categories (masculine/feminine, poet/actor, actor/character), and thus less easily dismissed.

At this moment, Agathon seems to embody a postmodern theory of identity (and in particular gender identity) as constructed, contingent upon the clothing, gestures, and mannerisms – the style, if you will – that a person assumes and displays. The fact that he seems to embody this theory, however, is crucial; as the play goes on to reveal, at other moments Agathon seems to espouse an essentialist theory of identity rooted in one’s innermost nature and expressed naturally in one’s body and appearance. Agathon’s essentialism comes as a surprise to critics looking for subversion in this play, for essentialism has been repudiated for some time now as a philosophy that has been used to keep the oppressed in their place through, e.g., theories of the “natural” inferiority of women. Yet essentialism, as Jonathan Dollimore reminds us, is not an inherently conservative philosophy, just as constructionism is not inherently radical; either can be used in either
Duncan: Agathon, Essentialism, and Gender Subversion

way, and subversion may or may not follow. And as Diana Fuss has argued, essentialism lurks beneath the surface of even the most avowedly constructionist theoretical positionings; the two are mutually implicated. Agathon’s use of both subject positions is, in fact, the most subversive move he makes.

Agathon embodies mimesis. He explains this in response to the kinsman’s puzzled questions:

Ag. ἐγὼ δὲ τὴν ἑσθήθος ἀμα γνώμη φορῶ. 
χρή γὰρ ποιητὴν ἄνδρα πρὸς τὰ δράματα 
ἀ δεὶ ποιεῖν πρὸς τὰ υἱα τοῦς τρόπους ἔχειν. 
αὐτίκα γυναικεῖ’ ἢν ποιή τις δράματα, 
μετουσίαν δεὶ τῶν τρόπων τὸ σώμ’ ἔχειν. 
Ki. οὐκοῦν κελητίζεις, ὅταν Φαίδραν ποιῆς; 
Ag. ἀνδρεία δ’ ἢν ποιή τις, ἐν τῷ σώματι 
ἐνεσθ’ ὑπάρχον τοῦθ’. ἃ δ’ οὐ κεκτήμεθα, 
μέμησις ἢδη ταύτα συνθηρεύεται. (148-56)

Ag. I change my clothing along with my purpose. 
For it’s necessary that a poet-man have habits 
according to the plays which he must write. 
For example, if one is writing feminine plays, 
one’s body must participate in their habits. 
Ki. Therefore you ride bareback when you write a 
Phaedra?
Ag. If you’re writing about masculine things, that 
which you need is there in your body; but if we 
don’t have it, then it must be captured by imitation.

He is a sort of “method writer,” changing his outfits to match his compositions – or perhaps the reverse: writing his plays based on the outfit he is wearing. But Agathon also talks about his body, not just about his clothes: “one’s body must participate in their habits (τρόποι).” What are these tropoi? How does one perform mimesis on the body? Günther Stohn decides that these tropoi consist of a feminine appearance and bearing, in addition to the wearing of women’s clothing. This seems like a reasonable reading, except for the follow-up question by the kinsman – “So when you write a
Phaedra, you mount astride?" – and Agathon’s answer. The kinsman understands Agathon’s assertion much as Stohn does, albeit much more crudely: what it must mean for Agathon’s body to participate in women’s habits is that he has sex like a woman; he imitates the behavior of women. Agathon’s coy answer, however, obscures the issue once again. He does not address the kinsman’s blunt sexual reduction of his aesthetic theory, but instead “explains” that if he writes a play for men, then he already has what he needs, but if he is writing a play for women, his body must use mimesis. Is he talking about behavior or anatomy? Is he talking about the phallus, or isn’t he? (“If you’re a woman, where are your tits? If you’re a man, where’s your dick?”) How could he use mimesis to capture those aspects of a woman’s body that he lacks?

Our immediate impulse is to agree with Stohn that Agathon must be talking about behavior; he must be talking about the performance of gender. The passage is reasonably clear this way, whereas introducing the idea of the physical body keeps everything much more confused. But I think it is important that Aristophanes has depicted Agathon in this way: clouding the issue, obscuring the kinsman’s view of his bodily identity. Agathon’s appearance raises the questions: what, if anything, is under the costume? Does the actor beneath the costume of “Agathon” undermine the character’s assertions about his essential nature? Or does the presence of the male actor’s body beneath the feminine clothing Agathon wears ground the character at some basic level in a stable, masculine identity? The uneasiness provoked by these questions does not dissipate with mockery of the tragedian. Agathon is onstage to be laughed at, to be sure – we must never lose sight of this fact – but so is the kinsman. And if Agathon’s appearance and song, his coy, teasing manner and his refusal to be classified, work on the kinsman, the internal audience, then they work on the larger audience too. Part of Agathon’s power is his ability to make blurring boundaries seductive. And sure enough, the kinsman’s next action is to dress up as a woman.

After using the term mimesis and adducing poetic role-models for his effeminately luxurious dress (Ibycus, Anaëreon, Alcaeus, Phrynichus), Agathon famously goes on to give a second and conflicting theory of art alongside his earlier one:
And Phrynichus was an attractive man and he dressed attractively, and for this reason his plays were also attractive.

One writes according to one’s nature.

The conclusion that the work reflects the poet’s nature follows from the assertion that the Ionian poets of yore were all attractive and well-dressed men, but it does not square with Agathon’s earlier claims about dressing to suit the play he is writing. This second, essentialist claim about the way mimesis works – outward, from the poet’s nature to his writing – uses the same logic as the ancient biographies of poets, which attributed Sophocles’ pleasant verses to his pleasant personality, for example. The first, constructionist claim about mimesis – that it works inward, from the clothes to the poet’s nature – is much more anxiety-provoking. It suggests that the clothes we put on can change our natures, that we are all actors, acting to suit our costumes. And Agathon refuses to disentangle the two theories. When the kinsman finally comprehends his theory about creating work that reflects one’s nature (“That’s why Philocles who’s ugly writes ugly plays!” 170), Agathon replies, “It’s utterly inevitable, and knowing this, I gave myself this treatment” (171-72). Because he recognized that his nature determines the kind of poetry he writes (and how he dresses), he dressed himself that way. In other words, because he realized the second, constructionist theory about mimesis was correct, he implemented the first, essentialist theory. Both cannot be true, seemingly – and yet Agathon insists on keeping both in play. He will not be categorized. He is self-creating: “what we lack, we capture by mimesis.”

Euripides asks Agathon at this point to help him by going undercover, as a woman, to the Thesmophoria where the women are plotting Euripides’ downfall. Agathon refuses, giving two reasons: a quotation of a line from Euripides’ Alcestis (“You love life; do you think your father does not?” 194) and the explanation that the women would treat him even more harshly than Euripides if he were discovered. The use of Euripides’ verse against him makes Agathon a parodist in his own right, a fact which is not usually noted; it is another
way in which he is able to turn the tables on those who mock him. His “explanation” is vaguely worded and has been translated various ways:

δοκῶν γυναικῶν ἔργα νυκτερεύσια
κλέπτειν ύφαρπάζειν τε θήλειαν Κύρπιν.
(204-05)

I’d look to be stealing the nocturnal doings of women and absconding with the female Kypris. (Henderson)

...they think I steal women’s knockturnal business, and rob them of the female’s natural rights. (Sommerstein)

By “female Aphrodite,” Agathon probably means “female sexual enjoyment,” as Henderson thinks; thus these lines mean something like “they think I steal the nighttime business of women / and filch away their feminine pleasure.” This reading seems most likely based on the kinsman’s response: “‘Steal’? You mean get fucked!” I would argue, however, that Agathon’s lofty tone and euphemistic, vague words are significant not only as an Aristophanic parody of his high-tragic style, but as another example of how he keeps his identity mysterious.

After Agathon refuses to go undercover for Euripides, the kinsman volunteers instead. Euripides proceeds to singe the kinsman’s anus and then dress him in women’s clothing, a bit of metatheatrical stage business that calls attention both to the artifice of femininity and to the costuming that all actors must go through. It also makes the kinsman look more like Agathon, of course. Agathon supplies all of the props needed to disguise the kinsman as a woman: razor, torch, bra, dress, wig, cloak, shoes. The kinsman’s drag is very different from Agathon’s, parodic rather than illusionistic. The kinsman and Agathon occupy opposite poles of masculinity; according to the standard interpretations of this comedy, the kinsman’s masculinity is so overwhelming that it is the reason why his female disguise fails. Yet we do see the kinsman embrace his female role: he wants to make sure his hem hangs straight (256), he swears by Aphrodite (254), he is concerned about the fit of his wig and shoes (260, 263). Even on the kinsman, it seems, clothes do “dictate what you do.” Once he volunteers to go on Euripides’ mission, the kinsman proves quite
comfortable with the idea of costume, disguise, impersonation, and parody, changing personas multiple times in his attempts to cue Euripides’ rescue. Watching Agathon perform has had a measurable effect on this spectator: he has become an actor.

It is interesting to note that the kinsman expresses his erotic arousal at Agathon’s performance before he questions Agathon’s appearance (130-45); at some level, the kinsman finds the tragedian arousing regardless of whether he can make sense of his attire. Even after Agathon begins to explain that he changes his clothes to suit the role he is composing, the kinsman offers to “collaborate with you, long and hard, from the rear” (τιν θεμποδός συνίπασθεν ἐστικὼς ἐγώ; trans. Sommerstein, 158) if he should ever write a satyr play. Critics too often dwell on the kinsman’s comic confusion about Agathon’s appearance and fail to analyze his attraction to Agathon despite, or perhaps because of that appearance.¹⁷

A great deal of recent scholarship has undertaken to delineate the practices and prohibitions surrounding love between men (and between men and boys) in Classical Athens. The consensus, as it stands now, builds on Foucault’s insight that sexual relations in ancient Athens were structured along power imbalances and around certain acts, rather than between individuals with complementary “orientations.” Thus women, boys, and slaves are all functionally equivalent sexual objects for the adult citizen male, who may choose to penetrate any or all of them without compromising his masculinity. What did compromise one’s masculinity was to be an adult male who was penetrated by another adult male; it is thought that this was akin to surrendering one’s privileged power status. These men were subject to the stigma that the term “homosexual” still carries in most parts of the world today; they were labeled kinaidoi or katapugones, considered to be effeminate, and regarded with horror.¹⁸

This is precisely the portrait of Agathon that Aristophanes paints in the Thesmophoriazusae — and yet the kinsman is attracted to Agathon nevertheless.¹⁹ Why would the kinsman, who is routinely taken to be the character onstage with whom the audience identifies,²⁰ find a kinai dos attractive? Or, to rephrase the question more generally, why are kinaidoi apparently attractive despite the horror they arouse when a man imagines being one himself? The proponents of the Foucauldian paradigm of Greek sexuality do not directly address this question; presumably, a hole is a hole to the man wielding the phallus, even if the hole belongs to a kinai dos. Since there was no such thing as a
sense of sexual "orientation" or "identity," according to these scholars, penetrating a *kinaidos* would not compromise one's masculinity any more than penetrating a woman would. This explanation, however, does not address the issue of desire – or rather, the strange mingling of desire and horror that the specter of the *kinaidos* seems to arouse.

In his recent book, *Courtesans and Fishcakes*, James Davidson challenges the Foucauldian model of sexual behavior in Classical Athens. He argues that the *katapugon* and the *kinaidos* were figures who represented appetites out of control in general and points to evidence from comedy in which these supposedly "passive" figures are described as buggering other male characters. Calling someone a *katapugon* or a *kinaidos* is calling him lewd or insatiable, not calling him a "passive homosexual"; this is why adulterers and animals such as the mouse and the wrasse were also called *katapugon*. Davidson dismisses the notion of "passive homosexuality" altogether as an ignorant fiction, an awkward compromise constructed by scholars to "reconcile a morality in which the most important thing is to avoid penetration with a morality centered on the necessity for self-control." Finally, he takes issue with the idea of "zero-sum" sexual relationships organized around power differentials and argues for a reacknowledgement of the pleasure of sex.21

If we are persuaded by Davidson's argument, then we need to re-evaluate our ideas about Agathon. He is called a *katapugon* by the kinsman (200), who offers to bugger him whenever he should happen to write a satyr play; what this means is that the kinsman sees Agathon as sexually insatiable, essentially lewd. At its most basic level, Davidson's argument calls for viewing the "passive homosexual" as an actively desiring subject, not as an object – and for seeing that the Athenians saw him that way too.

Even passive sodomites are shown joining in [sexual activity] at every level, like the sausage-seller making his arse wide [Knights 780-21], and experiencing pleasure, as the *Problemata* show, not in sexual domination but in sex itself, a pleasure even greater than that of the penetrating partner, a pleasure like that of women: an itching kind of pleasure without end. The *kinaidos* / *katapugon* is not a sexual pathetic, humiliated and made effeminate by repeated domination, he is a nymphomaniac, full of womanish
desire, who dresses up to attract men and has sex at the drop of a hat.22

Agathon’s effeminate clothing, then, points to his insatiable sexual appetite. He is dressed to seduce. Of course the kinsman wants him.

This re-reading of the sexual mores of classical Athens should not blind us to the details of Aristophanes’ presentation of Agathon, however. His effeminate costume23 and incongruous props are both important, despite the fact that the best translation for katapugon may be “nympho” or “slut” rather than “faggot” (as Henderson and Sommerstein render it). Agathon’s fundamental indeterminacy makes him a figure for the identity of the self; he opens up what Garber would call a “space of possibility,”24 both physically and aesthetically—that is, in terms of both sex and gender, as an essentialist and as a constructionist. We need to look more closely at both the kinsman’s and the audience’s reaction to Agathon. The kinsman finds him laughable, horrible, but ultimately desirable; the audience, in turn, is encouraged to laugh at the thick-witted, lusty kinsman as much as at the effeminate, pretentious tragedian.

One reason for laughing at the kinsman’s reaction to Agathon, of course, is that it masks anxiety: the kinsman is aroused by Agathon’s music and costume, that is, by the dramatic spectacle Agathon presents. Agathon is performing a “women’s play” when the kinsman observes him, as we remember, and the point of Aristophanes’ mockery seems to be the effeminacy of Agathon’s costume, music, and lifestyle. In Agathon’s hands, Aristophanes is saying, tragedy is “women’s plays.” And the kinsman loves it in spite of himself. When the audience is invited to laugh at the kinsman’s gushing reaction to Agathon’s tragic performance, it suggests that the kinsman, as a kind of audience to Agathon, is doing something wrong.25 The anxiety here is that the audience of a tragedy can become effeminate by watching (and hearing) it. Plato more or less spells out this anxiety in the Republic, arguing that watching actors impersonate “unworthy” characters (women, slaves, and cowardly men) leads the audience (and the actors) to fall prey to the same flaws as the characters have.26 The kinsman is aroused by Agathon’s appearance—both his physical appearance and his dramatic entrance—and then backs off, tries to figure out what Agathon is, tries to read his accessories, clothes, and body for clues to his identity. But Agathon has a sword as well as a mirror, and he lacks both breasts and phallus; he resists classification.
His body is as mimetic as his clothes, and it "takes on what it needs." His body is a costume. He has made sex, as well as gender, a theatrical construct—even as he insists on having an essential "nature."

In Agathon, we have playwright, actor, and character in one figure onstage. Aristophanes uses him to suggest the dangerous potential of watching tragedy: seeing him and listening to him makes the audience resemble him. Agathon is in this way a figure for the operation of desire in theatrical performance. He is an object of desire, dressed up to seduce, performing for an audience. The audience (that is, Euripides and the kinsman, and by extension, the festival audience) finds him both horrifying, laughable, in his effeminacy—"I thought he was Cyrene the courtesan!"—but also attractive to watch. And attraction, as we have seen, leads to imitation; spectatorship leads to mimesis of the person watched. That is, wanting to watch him becomes wanting to have him, which in turn becomes wanting to be him. His desirability is the key to his subversive power. Just as Agathon refuses to disentangle his two conflicting theories of artistic composition (the clothes one wears determine the play one writes [constructionism]; one writes according to one's nature and thus dresses that way [essentialism]), the desire he inspires confounds the distinction between feminine and masculine, between performance and essence, between having and being, between possession and identity.

Despite the allegedly inherent conservatism of comedy in general and Aristophanes in particular, the figure of Agathon in the Thesmophoriazusae unsettles the tidy boundaries between masculine and feminine—even between male and female—from within the system. The comedy displays a character, played by an actor, claiming that his inner nature determines the feminine clothing he wears and is also altered by the clothing he wears. If the audience looks at all beyond the joke, it finds that its conceptions of gender are essentially more constructed than it thought.
Notes

1. Frances Muecke, “Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman,” pp. 41-42; Günther Stohn, “Zur Agathonszene in den ‚Thesmophoriazusen‘ des Aristophanes,” p. 200. In the *Acharnians*, the robustly masculine Dicaecopolis goes to Euripides to borrow a raggedy disguise from one of his heroes in rags; in the *Thesmophoriazusae*, Euripides goes to the *kinaidos* Agathon to borrow some women's clothing. Euripides' own masculinity is relatively compromised in *Acharnians*, by comparison to Dicaecopolis, but relatively affirmed in *Thesmophoriazusae*, by comparison to Agathon. This re-working of the scene reveals that, while the occupation of playwright was not considered to be terribly manly, playwrights were not automatically considered *kinaidoi*; Euripides moves along a continuum, while Agathon is located at one end of it.

2. On the question of whether the *ekkyklema* was in use in the fifth century, and specifically in this passage, see C.W. Dearden, *The Stage of Aristophanes*, Ch. 4, esp. pp. 55, 57-59; Peter Arnott, *Greek Scenic Conventions*, Ch. 5.

3. It is impossible to be certain whether Agathon is speaking the lines of a female character or of the female coryphaeus; see Muecke, pp. 46-47.

4. I must disagree with Suzanne Saïd, “Travestis et travestissements dans les comédies d’Aristophane,” p. 230, who feels that “Il serait donc absurde de penser qu’Agathon porte sur lui toutes les pièces de costume qui sont énumérées ici” because the passage partly parodies Aeschylus’ *Lycurgus*. She seems to admit the necessity of taking these lines as exact prop descriptions, however, when she reads the same passage to indicate that the actor playing Agathon is not wearing a leather phallus (ibid).

As for the issue of Agathon’s phallus, the lines spoken by the kinsman imply that Agathon does not have a phallus visible, as the other male characters onstage do. Whether the actor playing him was dressed as a typical male comic character, phallus and all, and then dressed in women’s clothes over that costume, hiding the phallus (but not its outline under the dress?) from view, or whether he was simply dressed as a comic female character, is impossible to ascertain. Either way would be “funny,” presumably. Arthur Pickard-Cambridge, pp. 221-22, thinks that the actor who played Agathon did not wear a phallus. Lauren Taaffe seems to think that the actor was wearing a phallus; she writes that the kinsman’s question, “Where’s your dick?” “is even more amusing than his confusion, for it calls attention to the male under Agathon’s costume while it highlights the apparent absence of Agathon’s badge of masculinity” (*Aristophanes and Women*, p. 81). Unless she is speaking of the actor’s maleness, rather than Agathon’s, of course.

5. Peter von Blanckenagen, “Stage and Actors in Plato’s *Symposium*,” p. 59, referring to the less flamboyantly dressed Agathon in Plato’s *Symposium*: “In modern slang, Agathon is a drag queen.” Taaffe, p. 81, notes that Agathon’s lack of false breasts indicates that “he is not clearly either female or male.”

6. An interesting comparison is with the figure of Joan of Arc, who dressed as a man (in armor, with cropped hair) but did not attempt to disguise herself as a man; see Shakespeare’s *1 Henry VI* and Shaw’s *Saint Joan*. See also Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests*, p. 217, who quotes various actresses who have played Joan in Shaw’s *Saint
Joan; some of them explain away her wearing armor as merely “necessary” for her goal (what Garber calls “the progress narrative”), but other actresses talk about the way clothes “dictate what you do.” See also Garber, pp.151-52, on modern-day drag performers deliberately mixing “masculine” and “feminine” items of clothing or accessories: “Onstage, this method is called, significantly, ‘working with (feminine) pieces’—so that the artificiality of the ‘feminine’ (or the ‘feminine piece’) is overtly acknowledged and brought to consciousness.”

7. Probably the best-known theorist of this position is Judith Butler: in Gender Trouble, she argues that “Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constructed in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts” (p. 140; italics hers).

8. See Dollimore, Sexual Dissidence, Chs.1-4. Dollimore discusses Andre Gide and Oscar Wilde as homosexuals who subverted societal norms from opposite theoretical positions: Wilde, of course, was the proto-post-modern social constructionist, while Gide was an unconventional essentialist: “Indeed, to the extent that Gide’s essentialist legitimation of homosexual desire was primarily an affirmation of his own nature as pederast or paedophile, some critics might usefully rethink their own assumption that essentialism is fundamentally and always a conservative philosophy” (p.71).

10. Stohn, p.198; see Muecke, p.55.
11. In her discussion of Monique Wittig (pp.49-53), Fuss articulates the ways in which a strict constructionist stance cannot deal adequately with the body.
12. The first attested technical use of the term, according to Froma Zeitlin, “Travesties of Gender and Genre in Aristophanes’ Thesmophoriazousae,” p.383, in Playing the Other.
13. Mary Lefkowitz, Lives of the Greek Poets, p.80. Of course, this “logic” is based on reading backwards, inferring the playwright’s personality from the tone of his verses.
14. Lesley Ferris, Acting Women, p.28, reads this play as reducing all women to this list of props, while male characters are “real” because they have phalluses over and in addition to any costume. While I think the issue is more complicated than this reading allows, Ferris’ reading of stage women as only clothes meshes nicely with Karen Bassi’s analysis of the essentially feminine (i.e. deceptive, theatrical) nature of clothing (Acting Like Men, Ch.3; see note 27 below), and with Zeitlin’s argument that woman was seen as inherently mimetic (“Playing the Other” in Playing the Other).
15. See Jeffrey Henderson, p.97; Alan Sommerstein, p.9; Taaffe, pp.84, 90-91; Zeitlin, “Travesties,” p.385.
16. Taaffe notes that once he is among the women at the festival, the Relative “tries hard to speak correctly as a woman, and for the most part he succeeds,” slipping up only once (θύειν ἔχουσιν, 288, a masculine expression) (p.87). The parallels between this scene of transvestic disguise and the “Robing Scene” in Euripides’ Baccchae (810-976) are fascinating. In both plays, a seemingly virile man is dressed as a woman, somewhat against his will, and then he finds that his clothes change him: “Is my hem straight?” they both ask. The two scenes taken together suggest a deep anxiety about theatrical spectatorship: it seems to lead, over and over, to effeminacy and humiliation.
17. Muecke, pp.48-49, provides a fine analysis of the way in which Agathon’s song is musically arousing to the kinsman (an example of the “New Music,” with voluptuous, eccentric rhythms), but little mention of Agathon’s visual effect on the kinsman. Taaffe reads the kinsman’s arousal in two different and mutually exclusive ways: “The scene provides an opportunity for an analysis of the spectator’s gaze and the semiotics of theater, for the Relative sees the man underneath Agathon’s female costume and jokes about thinking, at first, that he was seeing the prostitute Cyrene (97-8)” (p.80); “The spectacle of Agathon dressed and speaking like a woman, no matter how confused or incomplete the pretense of femininity, has aroused the Relative’s desires and he, as an aggressive and masculine comic figure, voices them” (p.90). Her first statement suggests that “the man underneath Agathon’s costume” is visible to the kinsman, while her second statement suggests that Agathon’s “pretense of femininity” is what the kinsman finds arousing. Does the costume work, or doesn’t it? The answer I would suggest is that Agathon’s indeterminacy is, at least in part, what turns the kinsman on. Zeitlin, “Travesties” p.401, notes Agathon’s indeterminacy and compares him to Dionysus, but she does not address the issue of the kinsman’s desire directly.

18. See Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality II*; K.J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*; David Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality* (especially Chs. 1 and 5); John J. Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire* (especially Chs. 1 and 2); Halperin, Winkler, and Zeitlin, eds., *Before Sexuality*. The most extreme statement of the “anti-orientation” position is Halperin’s, who insists (in the face of some compelling evidence otherwise) that no conception of sexual “orientation,” no idea of “homosexuality” (or “heterosexuality”) as we now define it existed. For one view that suggests that “homosexuality” as we conceive of it did exist in the ancient world, see John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century*. For another view that opposes Halperin’s, although it draws exclusively on Roman evidence, cf. Amy Richlin, “Not Before Homosexuality: The Materiality of the Cinaedus and the Roman Law Against Love Between Men.”

19. K.J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, p.140, reads line 35, in which Euripides answers the kinsman’s questions about who this Agathon is with “Well, you’ve fucked him, but perhaps you don’t know him” as “implying that the effeminate Agathon has functioned as a male prostitute in the dark.” The line could be read instead to mean that the kinsman has had sex with Agathon without knowing his name; or that he has only seen Agathon from behind, in the act; or that he thought Agathon was a woman when they had anal sex; or it could simply be a cheap shot that does not try to make sense. In any event, the joke sets up the issue of the kinsman’s arousal.

20. Taaffe takes the kinsman to be “an intermediary through whom the audience’s gaze is filtered,” pp.78, 80 (yet she later calls him “a comic buffoon” on pp.82, 84, which would suggest that the audience might not see him as their representative onstage). Henderson, in his introduction to his translation of the Thesmophoriazusaes, sees the kinsman as nothing less than the embodiment of the robust, masculine spirit of comedy itself (pp.96-97), as does Sommerstein in his introduction to his translation, p. 9.


22. Davidson, p.179. Pentheus’ reaction to Dionysus’ appearance in Euripides’ *Bacchae* (453-59) supports Davidson’s view of Athenian sexuality: Pentheus reads
Dionysus’ effeminate clothing and long hair as signs that he is a seducer of women, not that he is a “sex object.” See Davidson on Alcibiades, p.177. Aristophanes’ myth of the halved sexes in Plato’s Symposium also supports this view: the “androgy nous” whole that was split into male and female halves produces men who are womanizers and adulterers (191d-e), presumably because they were once half-female and are thus still innately lustful.

23. Muecke believes that Agathon may be wearing long Ionian robes, like the poetic models he mentions, instead of women’s clothing, although she admits that this “seems to eliminate the possibility of a visual assimilation of the poet to the female characters he is ‘imitating’” (p.50) – which is a major objection.


25. On the kinsman as an “interior audience,” see Taaffe, pp. 80, 82-83, 88.


27. Bassi, pp.99-143 (published separately as “Male Nudity and Disguise in the Discourse of Greek Histrionics”), draws out the cultural logic by which “clothing is generally encoded as feminine in Greek culture,” signifying the gap between appearance and reality, the essential deceptiveness of women – what she calls “the Pandora paradigm.” Heroic male nudity is opposed to feminine clothing, on Archaic pottery and in later discourse. This means that “disguise signifies compromised masculinity” for male characters in the Odyssey and elsewhere, and she suggests that the Proagon, the part of the Great Dionysia in which the poet and actors are thought to have appeared before the audience without their masks, really had the poet and actors appear nude in order to reaffirm their masculinity before donning costumes. While I do not agree with all of her conclusions, Agathon, as a male character completely covered in feminine clothing, fits this “paradigm” nicely.

Works Cited


Duncan: Agathon, Essentialism, and Gender Subversion


