

Agathon and Agathon. Male Sensuality in Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae* and Plato's *Symposium*

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In Athens, most probably at the Great Dionysia (or perhaps the less dazzling festival Lenaia) of 416 BCE, the prize for best tragedy went to a first time playwright¹. His name was Agathon. We know quite a bit about this man – that he was exceedingly handsome, that he used to invent his own plots, instead of reinventing story-lines and stock characters; that he had a strikingly distinctive style, metaphorical in the wording, and sensual in the melodies – that he was part of an aesthetic revolution, known as “new music”. Aristotle mentions him more than once in his *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*, and shows his genuine admiration, by placing the author of *The Flower* in the league of the very best, such as Euripides or Sophocles².

1 — On the problem of which festival, and the Dionysian competitive setting: Sider 1980.

2 — Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1402 a 10; *Poetics*, 1451 b 21-25; 1456 a 15-32. The most systematic attempt to reconstruct the big picture of Agathon's life and work remains Levêque 1955. On one of the plays attributed to Agathon, the *Anthos* or *Antheus*, see: Pitcher 1939.

Alas, no complete play by Agathon has survived, not even the one for which he was, apparently, crowned before 30.000 spectators and for which he won the first prize, that day in the spring of 416 BCE. However, we know that, after his triumph, Agathon threw a party at his house – what one would have called, casually, a symposium – to celebrate. It was a gathering of celebrities. The guest list included an even more successful and fashionable playwright, Aristophanes; a good doctor and amateur philosopher, Eryximachos; a visible public intellectual, notoriously fond of public speaking, Phaedrus; a fascinatingly intriguing, meddling and yet unclubbable cultural critic, Socrates; a rather unprepossessing individual, named Aristodemos, who came uninvited; and, of course, Agathon's long-time lover, Pausanias – not to mention a couple of unnamed visitors – the kind of “other guests” you would see, smiling enthusiastically, in the photos of glamorous social events, behind Tom Ford or Elton John. Later in the evening, a throng of inebriated characters would join the company, led by a trend-setting dandy, a young general whose beauty was in high repute, Alcibiades, son of Cleinias. More anonymous friends of friends turned up in the middle of the night.

We know about the party from a quite unusual cool-hunter and night-life chronicler, Plato. One of his dialogues is entitled, precisely: *The drinking party*, or, in academic parlance, *The Symposium*. Plato composed the *Symposium*, most probably in the years around 380 BCE. Because of the setting and the constraints of the ceremonial scenario, this is perhaps the most theatrical, even Dionysian, of Plato's pieces. The company convenes, banter begins between the host and his guests – where should one sit, and near whom – and, before long the drinking party has morphed into a talking party. *Logoi* will flow, from now on, instead of wine. The only woman present, a flute-player, is asked kindly to leave the room.

These men wish to enjoy a moment of unscathed pleasure: conversation. And this, the pleasure of words, is for gentlemen only. Let conversation commence then, but about what? About love. Love, Eryximachos laments (quoting his friend Phaedrus), is so important in our life, and yet, unforgivably, there has never been a hymn or a speech written in praise of it – or, more to the point, of him. Because *Eros*, we know only too well, is a God³.

In a culture so fond of praise and blame, where poetry is, above all, a celebration of beauty – beauty of people, beauty of deeds; a culture where commemorations and eulogies are so much part of public speaking; a culture where democratic rhetoric, and especially funerary eloquence, has embraced, in a remarkable ideological move, the aristocratic tradition of

3 — Plato, *Symposium*, 177 a-c.

excellence remembered, and magnified – in Athens, that is – the alleged silence about the merits of *Eros* is deafening. Phaedrus has a point, and a philologically perceptive one. There is, as far as we know, no Homeric Hymn to *Eros*⁴. There are choral monodies addressed to *Eros* in Sophocles' *Antigone* and in Euripides' *Hippolytos*⁵. These songs could hardly be taken as a whole-hearted encomion of the god, however, especially the latter, since the chorus mentions the absence of a cult to *Eros*, the “tyrant of men”, before launching in a catalogue of “the destructive reversals of fortune”, as Claude Calame puts it, which *Eros* and Aphrodite inflict upon women and men⁶. At the dramatic date of 416 BCE, Eryximachos could not acknowledge the parabasis of Aristophanes' *Birds* (produced in 414 BCE), which eulogize *Eros* in jest, as a cosmogonic power.

Let us now remedy this situation, says Eryximachos: let us take turns and extol *Eros*⁷!

In a brief exchange of social niceties, the opening scene of the *Symposium* creates a gendered space/time. Whereas Platonic dialogues simply involve men, as a matter of fact, this one makes the point of drawing the line. To send away the flute-player is an emphatic act of exclusion. Let her sing to herself, or, if she likes, to the women in the house⁸! This dramatic detail sets the stage for an activity that can only flourish if women are excused. In a purely male company, it will finally be fit to talk about love. As modern readers, let us now pretend to be naïve: is it not strange that a group of *men* should discuss love? Fifth-century tragedy, where Medea or Phaedra could theorize *eros* as what was “all” for them, allows for this question. Tragedy is in the background of Plato's dialogues, especially this one, held in Agathon's home, to honor his premiere. Where is sexual difference, therefore, among these philosophers and poets? It is, at least until the final turn of events, nowhere. It is men who do the talking. It is, more to the point, men who love each other – and know about love. Masculine intimacy frames a discourse which is constantly aware of gender: the speakers compare love between women and men on the one hand, and love between men, on the other. Same-sex love will emerge as a higher experience, however, not because it binds similar individuals, but because of the better quality of those individuals. This circle of equally superior males will utter a graciously discordant, and yet unanimous, praise of their own reciprocal desire. In Agathon's

4 — For a discussion of the poetic celebrations of *Eros*, see Calame 1999; Breitenberger 2007.

5 — Sophocles, *Antigone*, 781-795 (see Calame 1999: 146-148). Euripides, *Hippolytos*, 535-564 (see Calame 1999: 3-6).

6 — Calame C., 1999: 5; see also 148.

7 — Plato, *Symposium*, 177 d.

8 — Plato *Symposium*, 176 e.

salon (before the surprising evocation of Diotima of Mantinea), there is no space for femininity; no time for effeminacy.

In contrast, on the stage of Athenian theater, the same playwright could be ferociously lampooned. Thirty years before the composition of the *Symposium*, in 411 BCE, Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae* had exposed a farcical version of the same man, to an audience of ordinary Athenians. Agathon had been made into a caricature of sexual indeterminacy, cross dressing, camp manners and drag performance. On the stage, the poet had been welcomed with obtuse stupor, and aggressive sexual remarks, by a character (whom Euripides introduces as a relative of his, more precisely a *kedestes*, an in-law). Inlaw embodied the uncouth Athenian man – macho, ill-mannered and alien to refined poetry. Out of an environment of male self-love and self-praise, *Eros*' most glamorous champion could attract *phthonos* and *psogos*: not admiration, but envy; not applause, but contempt.

The comparison of Agathon and Agathon – his platonic glorification and his comedic denigration – allows us to map the erotic culture of the most complicated among Greek lovers, the men of Athens. Conducted in a more systematic manner than it has ever been done before⁹, this face-to-face greatly enhances our understanding of the polyphonic Athenian discourse about desire and pleasure; female and male; body and language; domination and reciprocity. Since this corroborates a critique of the oversimplified “paederastic model”¹⁰, based upon the alleged “isomorphism” of social superiority, domination *and penetration*, the profit is quite considerable¹¹. Such “isomorphism” is nowhere to be found in discourses

9 — A comparison of Agathon's two portraits can be found in Blanckenhagen 1992. “The Platonic Agathon is, at first sight, a person very different from the Aristophanic one. Above all he is exquisitely polite, civilized, and well-mannered”, writes Blanckenhagen (60). This is true, but then he adds: “He is an aging, effeminate beauty, Pausanias beloved, a passive homosexual. And yet his effeminacy and pretense causes only good-natured banter, ironic but never malicious. There is not the slightest sign of the customary Athenian contempt for such a person.” (61). The “Agathonian” atmosphere of the evening has to do with “the host's civility, vanity, and lack of manliness” (61). I cannot agree with the insistence on unmanliness. Plato's Agathon is characterized neither as unmanly nor as passive. Duncan 2006 provides a subtle account of Agathon's ambivalent qualities, especially his gender indeterminacy. I disagree, however, on the similarity she sees between Aristophanes and Plato's treatments of the poet. “Plato portrays the effeminately beautiful Agathon as embodying the seductive lure of tragedy”, Duncan writes (28), before arguing that in both texts, the *Thesmophoriazusae* and the *Symposium*, the poet is cast as the actor, a man whose “hypocritical” identity was profoundly unsettling. Duncan also mentions the possibility that Plato's dialogue might allude to Aristophanes' play (27). I will argue for much more than an allusion: there is a radical contrast between the two texts; the *Symposium* operates a true recantation of the erotic poet.

10 — This critique is becoming more and more vocal. I only mention here what I consider the most substantive discussions: Boswell 1982 & 1989; Cohen 1987 and 1991; Richlin 1993; Cohen and Saller 1994; Davidson 1997, 2001, and 2007; Habinek 1997; Hubbard 1998, 2000 and 2003; Sissa 2008.

11 — The “isomorphism” was theorized by Michel Foucault (Foucault 1984: 96-98 ; 242), and subsequently restated by David Halperin (*Halperin* 1990: 30; 99; 130-131). I do not intend to

in *praise* of *eros*; the binary opposition of active and passive, penetrated and penetrating transpires only in a certain type of discourses about sex: those that *blame* an erotic relation between men. But there is even more to gain from an intertextual reading of the *Thesmophoriazusae* and the *Symposium*. Plato's dialogue, I will argue, refashions the character of Agathon, into a thorough palinode of the poet and, as a consequence, of male *eros*. This enriches our knowledge of the connections between Plato and Aristophanes, comedy and philosophy.

The intent of this paper, therefore, is double. Firstly, I will bring into focus the yawning gap between praise and blame, in the Athenian representations of love between males. Secondly, I will show how philosophically strategic is Plato's attempt to set the record straight, about *eros* and *mimesis*, in response to Aristophanes. These two lines of thought are interconnected. Only a close reading, attentive to the style, the rhetoric, the narrative and the interactive structure of these two texts – a comedy and a dialogue, two theatrical pieces that is – can capture the discordant voices of the many *dramatis personae* involved. Only such detailed attention to praise and blame does justice to the cultural *poikilia*, as Agathon's lover put it, of Athenian sexuality. Reciprocally, only by listening carefully to those dissonant options, we can begin to hear the authorial voices – Aristophanes and Plato themselves. Their variations on one man, beautiful Agathon, create quite an elaborate intertext: in the *Symposium*, Plato convenes Aristophanes in Agathon's home, the same interior that Aristophanes had brought onto the stage of the *Thesmophoriazusae*. In that intimate setting, the two poets will compete in eulogizing male homoeroticism, the kind of love the comedic scene had invidiously scorned. This can hardly be a coincidence¹². There was too much at stake, for Plato, in the sensuality of Athenian lovers.

argue *against* this interpretative frame, as I have done in *Sex and Sensuality in the Ancient World* (Sissa 2008), and in "Phusis and Sensuality" (Sissa forthcoming). I prefer to offer positive arguments and textual evidence, here, for a different vision of Athenian sexuality: a vision that emerges from the sources, their actual content, their genre, their language, their rhetorical strategies and their focus.

12 — As Andrea Nightingale has argued (Nightingale 1992), the intertextual and inter-generic affinity between a tragedy, the *Antiope*, and the *Gorgias*, both debating the choice of the best life-style, conveys Plato's deliberate re-articulation of a crucial dilemma, in a dramatic setting. I hope to show that Plato operates an analogous transformation, from the *Thesmophoriazusae* to the *Symposium*. The osmosis between a play and a Platonic dialogue presupposes a common ground: theatricality. Plato's choice of the dialogical form, as the invention of a different kind of stage – in order to enact different plots and discussions, for a different audience – has received increasing attention. For a discussion of this scholarly trend, and for a thorough reading of Plato as a reformer of theater and "rival" of fifth-century playwrights, see Puchner 2010: 3-36. For a radical argument on the dramatic intent, subservient to the purpose of attracting students to the Academy, see Arieti 1991. This plays down the theoretical content of the dialogues too much. On Socrates as a character who comes back on stage, dialogue after dialogue, engages in polyphonous exchanges, starts from the premises of his interlocutors, can occasionally develop with, and for them, beliefs he would not uphold by himself, but remains fundamentally "Plato's mouthpiece", see Rowe 2007: 15 and *passim*. I agree with this

Self-love and self-praise

The *Symposium* is a sequential performance of praise. This praise is gendered and auto-referential. The speakers are all men; they talk about *eros* between men; they laud the virtues of being male. In a perfect adaptation of the scenario to the content, men will praise men's love. The excellence of their sensuality will have to do with masculinity. Beyond their differences, all of Agathon's guests are proud of their shared, and mirrored, virility¹³. They all belong in the circle of *andreia*. Love is self-love; praise is self-praise.

Praise, *epainos* can be defined as the attribution of positive qualities to a subject. A genre of eloquence, called *epideictic*, "display", rhetoric, focuses on such purpose. As Aristotle will explain in the *Rhetoric*, praise brings into light excellence, as opposed to what is shameful, *aischron*¹⁴. This involves a wide range of words and tropes, especially metaphors, but also phrases and arguments, which explain how and why something, or someone, deserves to be praised. To capture the epideictic situation of the *Symposium*, we have to examine how and why, precisely, different speakers extol the same thing, *eros*. Andrea Nightingale has offered a methodical discussion of this performance of admiration, and of Socrates' criticism of its *moria* (to echo the felicitous title of the article)¹⁵. Ann Sheppard has revisited the question, from the angle of the dramatic situation, namely the elite audience of the performances¹⁶. My focus is the representation of masculine sensual love, which emerges from the interplay of the *logoi*, uttered by the symposiasts.

subtle and comprehensive interpretation of Plato's corpus, including the *Symposium* (Rowe 2006: 9-22). *Contra* Blondell 2002 argues that since "dramatic mimesis is the suppression of the authorial voice", to "assume the equivalence of any of Plato's characters with the voice of the author, or to infer it from the dialogues themselves" is a "basic methodological mistake" (16 and 19). The *Symposium*, which Blondell does not examine, would hardly corroborate such a drastic view.

13 — For a very different approach that contextualizes the *Symposium* within the Athenian "paederastic model", see Brisson 2006. For the reasons that will transpire in the following pages, I see this framework as utterly inadequate to explain the praise of male love.

14 — Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1, 3, 5: "The end of those who praise and blame is the beautiful and the shameful"; "Now praise is a discourse that makes visible the greatness of excellence (ἔστιν δ' ἔπαινος λόγος ἐμφανίζων μέγεθος ἀρετῆς); hence it is necessary to show that a man's actions are of that kind. But encomium deals with achievements – all attendant circumstances, such as noble birth and education, merely conduce to persuasion; for it is probable that virtuous parents will have virtuous offspring and that a man will turn out as he has been brought up. Hence we pronounce an encomium upon those who have achieved something. Achievements, in fact, are signs of moral habit; for we should praise even a man who had not achieved anything, if we felt confident that he was likely to do so" (Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1, 9, 33). The beautiful is defined, in turn, as what deserves praise: "The beautiful, then, is that which, being desirable in itself is at the same time worthy of praise, or which, being good, is pleasant because it is good. If this is the beautiful, then excellence must of necessity be something beautiful, for, being good, it is worthy of praise" (Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1, 9, 3).

15 — Nightingale 1993: 112-130.

16 — Sheppard 2008: 28-40.

Phaedrus opens the competition¹⁷. He performs a conventional, straightforward panegyric of love: love for usually younger men. *Erastes* is the one who loves; *eromenos*, the one who is loved. Notwithstanding their age difference, *eromenoi* and *erastai* form strongly united couples, Phaedrus argues. Each couple fosters the betterment of the two partners. There is solidarity between the two, and of course, reciprocity: shame in the eyes of one's lover, or one's beloved, stimulates emulation. Between two men, equally manly, *Eros* strengthens an ethos of excellence. Love, Phaedrus argues, is a powerful binding power. The best army, and the finest city, would be made of couples of lovers reinforcing each other's valour. This is an erotic of citizens and warriors¹⁸.

Then Pausanias makes his speech¹⁹. The picture, he claims, is more complicated: there are two Aphrodites, two kinds of love – and they are poles apart. One is earthly, vulgar, interested in a youthful body and its ephemeral beauty; the other one is higher, even celestial, attracted to the charms of the soul. The former *eros* is directed to both women and boys; the latter, to males only. Lovers come in these two, radically different, types. It is the responsibility of a young man, when he receives the attentions of a suitor, to discriminate. A smart boy ought to test his intentions, and then flee a hasty sexual predator; but he should reciprocate the desire of a lover who presents himself as sexually disinterested, yet keen on helping the intellectual and moral flourishing of his beloved. To such a generous *erastes*, an *eromenos* will ultimately grant erotic favors.

The language that depicts a felicitous relation insists on asymmetry, since the lover is older, and takes the initiative, while the beloved is younger, and responds. But asymmetry does not preclude reciprocity. Quite the contrary. There is “willing subjugation” on behalf of the lover, who is prepared to do everything for his beloved²⁰. There is “willing subjection”,

17 — My reading of the *Symposium* is indebted to three major interpretations: Jacques Lacan (Lacan 1991 & 2001); Leo Strauss (Strauss 2001), and Michel Foucault (Foucault 1984). Strauss gave his lectures on the *Symposium* in 1959. Lacan's seminar on transference was a thorough commentary of the *Symposium*, held in Paris in 1960-1961. Foucault read the *Symposium* while writing the second and third volume of the *History of Sexuality*, in the early Eighties. I am neither Lacanian, nor Straussian nor Foucauldian. I will engage with these three magisterial commentators, when their insights prove heuristic, in the discussion of specific passages. As I mentioned, in this paper I wish to offer positive arguments and textual evidence. Among recent scholarship, I found most inspiring the studies, mentioned *supra*, by Claude Calame, Andrea Nightingale and Christopher Rowe; but also Zeitlin 1981 & 1996; Hubbard 1998; Saetta-Cottone 2003 and 2010; Nichols 2009; Tasinato 2009; Belfiore 2012. I will quote the translated passages of the *Symposium* from: Nehamas and Woodruff 1989.

18 — Plato, *Symposium*, 178 d-e.

19 — Plato, *Symposium*, 180 c-185 c.

20 — Plato, *Symposium*, 184 b-d. ἔστι γὰρ ἡμῖν νόμος, ὥσπερ ἐπὶ τοῖς ἐρασταῖς ἦν δουλεῦεν ἐθέλοντα ἡντινοῦν δουλείαν παιδικοῖς μὴ κολακείαν εἶναι μηδὲ ἐπονείδιστον, οὕτω δὲ καὶ ἄλλη μία μόνη δουλεία ἐκούσιος λείπεται οὐκ ἐπονείδιστος: αὕτη δ' ἐστὶν ἡ περὶ τὴν ἀρετὴν.

on behalf of the beloved, who “is justified in performing any service for a lover who can make him wise and virtuous”²¹. This mutual submission deserves not blame, but praise, on both sides. When we look at the lover, conducts that, in other circumstances, might appear to be shameful and servile, such as kneeling and begging, do not incur reproaches, accusations of illiberality and flattery from enemies, or admonition from friends²². “Our custom is to praise lovers for totally extraordinary acts”, says Pausanias²³. “No blame attaches to [their] behavior: custom treats it as noble through and through”²⁴. If we place ourselves from the standpoint of the beloved, Pausanias argues, our customs reveal their complicated nature. Fathers are so keen on preventing the seduction of their children, that they hire attendants, in order to protect them. Friends and older men chide and reprove (ὀνειδίζω) a boy who is caught in a relationship²⁵. One might reckon that the Athenians praise a lover, therefore, but blame a beloved; more precisely that, from the perspective of a lover, they deem “the lover’s desire and the willingness to satisfy it as the most beautiful thing in the world (πάγκαλον)”, whereas, from the perspective of the beloved, they “consider such behavior the most shameful in the world (αἰσχιστον)”²⁶. But there is wisdom in such an apparently weird *nomos*. It is the intent to make it easy for the lover, and difficult for the beloved. Once a young man has chosen the best suitor, the heavenly one, only then he will deserve praise: it is beautiful, for him, to gratify such a lover²⁷.

A couple is worthy of praise when the passion of the older man who pursues a younger, charming youth, actually aims at the well being and, I would add, the “well-becoming”, of that malleable young person. In this case, sexual gratification becomes a surplus value. This is a variegated, multihued, complex game, Pausanias explains. The word he uses is: *poikilos*, “of many colours”. Contrary to other societies that either prohibit *eros* between males (the Persians), or simply take it for granted (the Elians and the Boeotians), this brand of urban love requires strategies of attractive offers and clairvoyant choices, of tactful proposals and cagey responses, of clever arguments and thoughtful decisions. The Athenians cultivate an art of love, which is made of words: courtship is persuasion; desire is

21 — Plato, *Symposium*, 184 c-d.

22 — Plato, *Symposium*, 182 d-183 c.

23 — Plato, *Symposium*, 182 e: ὁ νόμος δέδωκε τῷ ἐραστῇ θαυμαστά ἔργα ἐργαζομένῳ ἐπαινέσθαι.

24 — Plato, *Symposium*, 183 b: καὶ δέδοται ὑπὸ τοῦ νόμου ἀνεὺ ὀνειδίδους πράττειν, ὡς πάγκαλόν τι πρᾶγμα διαπραττομένου.

25 — Plato, *Symposium*, 183 d.

26 — Plato, *Symposium*, 183 c.

27 — Plato, *Symposium*, 184 e: ἐνταῦθα συμπίπτει τὸ καλὸν εἶναι παιδικὰ ἐραστῇ χαρίσασθαι.

rhetoric. Pausanias, I mentioned, was Agathon's lover: he knew very well what he was talking about – since he himself, formed a beautiful couple with the gracious, brilliant, stunning poet, so sensitive to language. Praise is, indeed, dual self-praise²⁸.

Eryximachos, the doctor, makes of *Eros* a cosmic power, which binds the universe. He speaks on behalf of his expertise, medicine, as “the knowledge of the erotic accords of the body, in terms of fullness and emptiness” (ἔστι γὰρ ἰατρική, ὡς ἐν κεφαλαίῳ εἰπεῖν, ἐπιστήμη τῶν τοῦ σώματος ἐρωτικῶν πρὸς πλησμονὴν καὶ κένωσιν)²⁹. Since medicine modifies or preserves the balance of hot and cold, wet and dry, sweet and bitter, this speech is all about the sensual qualities that contribute to the equilibrium of the body.

Then Aristophanes, the comic poet, once he recovers from a bout of hiccups, sketches the only tragic vision of love that emerges from this cheerful party: *Eros* is a craving/longing for a perfect fusion, with the person who is the one – and with whom we want to make one. That possibility is lost. Originally, human beings were spheres, equipped with feet, legs and sexual organs. They came in three genders: all female (from earth), all male (from the Sun) and androgynous (from the moon). They

28 — David Halperin has argued for the importance of reciprocity, in Plato's theory of love (Halperin 1986). In his opinion, this is a departure from the model of an Athenian paederastic relationship, which had to be not only asymmetrical and hierarchical, but also non-reciprocal. The beloved was passive, because he was penetrated, and because he was not supposed to reciprocate *eros* with *eros*. “According to the customary Greek idiom, the senior partner in a paederastic love-affair has a monopoly of *eros*; the junior partner, if he is responsive to his lover, expresses *philia*: he is *philerastes*, «fond of his *erastes*,» and is moved to *antiphilein*, «to feel affection for him in return» (only women are said to *anteran*, to return their lovers' sexual desire) [...]. The Platonic approach all but erases the distinction between lover and beloved, between the active and the passive partner – or, to put it better, the genius of Plato's analysis is that it eliminates passivity altogether: according to Socrates, both members of the relationship become active, desiring lovers; neither remains solely a passive object of desire” (66 and 68). I could not agree more about Plato's emphasis on mutual love, but there is a problem with the use of evidence. Halperin refers to Pausanias' speech in the *Symposium*, among the sources not of Plato's theory, but of Athenian paederasty. This is perfectly right. Pausanias speaks for himself and on behalf a kind of love that Socrates shuns, as Alcibiades sorely realized. But Halperin enrolls Pausanias in support of his thesis that, in Athens, relations between males were not reciprocal. “Pausanias distinguishes between the *eros* of Aristogeiton and the *philia* of his beloved, Harmodius (182c), pointing out that the lover's role is to *eran* and the beloved's is to *philous genesthai tois erastais* (183c)”. My objection is that, firstly, Pausanias describes reciprocity in a variety of words, as we have seen, form *χαρίσασθαι* to mutual “slavery”; secondly, *philia* and *philein* are not necessarily asexual, and therefore the *philein* or *philia* of a beloved does not have to be something less erotic than *eros*. Aristophanes makes this crystal clear in *Symposium*, 191 e: “the boys love men and enjoy lying with men and being embraced by men”, φιλοῦσι τοὺς ἀνδρας καὶ χαίρουσι συγκατακείμενοι καὶ συμπλεγμένοι τοῖς ἀνδράσι. If the use of φιλοῦσι might create an ambiguity, the rest of the sentence clarifies what the boys enjoy. Halperin argues that even Aristophanes' speech insists on the age difference between the two “halves” of the masculine sphere, but all the emphasis is on gender – which is the same for boys and *andres* (1990: 131; contra Boswell 1982 & 1990).

29 — Plato, *Symposium*, 186 c. For a valorizing reading of Eryximachos' speech, Edelstein 1945.

were perfect, self-centered and proud. Because of their arrogance, Zeus decided to have them sectioned into two halves. He also wanted their faces to be turned through 180 degrees, so that they would never lose sight of the scar from that surgery: the navel. Their sex organs, however, were still on their backs. Those humiliated, diminished individuals were desperate. Out of pity, Zeus then asked Apollo to perform a second operation. The sexual parts (*aidoia*) were removed from the back of the body, and then replaced in the front: below the navel, and under the eyes. Now these incomplete bodies – males and females, attracted to either females or males – can hold close, clasp and come together with their former “halves”. And yet, theirs will remain forever “elusive embraces”, in Daniel Mendelsohn’s words³⁰. The males who cling to males want to remain attached to each other for ever, but their amalgamation is discontinuous and unstable. We should probably see this as frontal intercrural sex, but Plato’s Aristophanes makes no allusion to the details of the sexual act. These men are most manly; they are “bold and brave and masculine”: this is why, pace those who accuse them of shamelessness, they “cherish what is like themselves”³¹.

The speeches bring into light the excellence of *eros*. Love between two males, notwithstanding what certain people might say (Aristophanes), and notwithstanding what can happen occasionally, when a boy yields injudiciously to an earthy lover (Pausanias), creates relationships that are beautiful and worthy of *epainos*. Two reasons become apparent, as the common ground for praise. The two partners are virile. They engage in a mutually beneficial exchange. If there is submission, this is reciprocal too and, therefore, it is commendable for the older as well as the younger man.

Agathon

After Aristophanes’ melancholic fantasy, it is finally the turn of Agathon. The poet starts from a definition of praise, as it should be properly performed: there is one correct manner of *epainos*, whatever the object³². One has to extol first the qualities, and then the gifts. The other speakers have acknowledged the benefits of *eros* for human beings and for nature, Agathon says, but no one has paid due compliments to *Eros* himself, to *Eros* the god. *Eros* is the very *cause* of our experience of

30 — Mendelsohn 2000.

31 — Plato, *Symposium*, 192 a: καὶ εἰσιν οὗτοι βέλτιστοι τῶν παίδων καὶ μεираκίων, ἅτε ἀνδρείοτατοι ὄντες φύσει φασὶ δὲ δὴ τινες αὐτοὺς ἀναισχύντους εἶναι, ψευδόμενοι: οὐ γὰρ ὑπ’ ἀναισχυντίας τοῦτο δρῶσιν ἀλλ’ ὑπὸ θάρρους καὶ ἀνδρείας καὶ ἀρρενωπίας, τὸ ὁμοίον αὐτοῖς ἀσπαζόμενοι.

32 — Plato, *Symposium*, 195 a: εἷς δὲ τρόπος ὀρθὸς παντὸς ἐπαίνου περὶ παντός.

love, and of everything that binds and brings us together, τὰς τοιάσδε συνόδους μετ' ἀλλήλων πάσας τιθεὶς συνιέναι³³. "If anything has an effect on him, it is never by violence, for violence never touches love. And the effects he has on others are not forced, for every service we give to love we give willingly, πᾶς γὰρ ἐκὼν Ἔρωτι πᾶν ὑπηρετεῖ. And whatever one person agrees on with another, when both are willing, that is right and just"³⁴. *Eros* is the father of the virtues: wisdom, justice, moderation and *andreia*, manliness³⁵.

Agathon emphasizes, unsurprisingly, the same reasons for glorifying Love: reciprocity and maleness. He will take that encomium, however, to a new level of amplification and hyperbole. The speech begins in prose, but it actually culminates with a hymn, in verse, to *Eros*, the youngest and the greatest of all the Immortals, their new king. Applause. The symposiasts go into raptures over Agathon's speech. Then Socrates opens his mouth. Like everyone else, he praises Agathon's praise, but he will inflict upon it, just for clarification, his usual questioning. "Is not *Eros*, *Eros* of something?" He asks. But if *Eros* is desire *of something*, isn't it because something is missing, something is not there? In a few sentences, *Eros* becomes *epithumia*, desire. Desire implies lack. "I did not know what I was saying", Agathon will have to admit.

To a first approximation we could say that Socrates uses Agathon, in order to make him acknowledge exactly that. Love is desire. Desire is nothing but lack. Because Agathon has made *Eros* absolutely beautiful – filled with beauty; covered in qualities; saturated with superlative attributes; because Agathon's *Eros* was exclusively a source of pleasure, never of pain; because it was all positive, with no negatives whatsoever; because, in sum, there was no dialectic in such a univocal, unconditional, uncritical admiration – all this calls for Socrates' unsparing *elenchos*. Finally, Socrates has been given the opportunity not simply to challenge the rhetoric of praise, but to bring about its complete reversal³⁶. He will intimate that, at the core of the erotic experience, there is ambivalence: a void without which there would be no craving, no yearning, and no sense of loss or incompleteness; no intensity, no passion. *Eros* is, to put

33 — Plato, *Symposium*, 197 d.

34 — Plato, *Symposium*, 196 b-c.

35 — Plato, *Symposium*, 196 d.

36 — Andrea Nightingale argues that Socrates refuses to play the game of the encomiastic competition. His *elenchos* is a lesson of *eironeia*, and anti-praise, with no invective or humiliation of the interlocutor (Nightingale 1993: 121-123). I agree, and I would add that Plato, having cast Agathon as the most hyperbolic interpreter of praise, makes clear that his refutation is indeed a vertiginous loss of face, and yet it is a courteous operation, conducted on Agathon's own terrain – language – as we will see in a moment.

it mildly, bittersweet. Or, more to the point, *Eros* is tragic. Agathon, the Dionysian winner, has to come to that recognition.

This is the pivotal moment. From now on, the praise of *eros* will become a completely different affair, as Diotima's speech will illustrate: a matter of poverty and longing, of moving desire, and even of desire not to possess, but to generate³⁷. It is Agathon's *elenchos* that opens the way to a radically different discourse on love. This is why Agathon's role is unique: he is the master of the house; he retches up the panegyric; he falls victim to Socrates' refutation, the only elenctic episode in the *Symposium*³⁸.

Let us magnify the text of the dialogue, at this decisive turning point.

In Agathon's words, *Eros* absorbs, embodies and monopolizes beauty (*kallos*); he is *kalos*, even *kallistos*; he is good, even *aristos*, in the superlative and in so many variations: youth, softness, delicacy, humidity, flowers, reciprocity, but also excellence (*arete*), wisdom (*sophia*), justice (*dikaiosune*) wise self-control (*sophrosune*), and manliness (*andreia*); he is the cause of all kind of creativity, from poetry to the generation of living beings, to the invention of all the arts³⁹. *Eros* is the new king of the gods⁴⁰. Socrates will now jeopardize that massive, unscathed attribution of goodness, we have seen, by insinuating that desire is desire *for something*. As a consequence, there must be, for *Eros*, something to be desired, something not yet possessed, something missing. This argument is based on how we actually speak, in Greek, about *eros*.

τοῦτο μὲν τοίνυν, εἰπεῖν τὸν Σωκράτη, φύλαξον παρὰ σαυτῶ
μεμνημένος ὅτου: τοσόνδε δὲ εἰπέ, πότερον ὁ Ἔρως ἐκείνου οὐ ἔστιν
ἔρως, ἐπιθυμεῖ αὐτοῦ ἢ οὐ;
πάνυ γε, φάναι.

37 — On Diotima and Socrates' speech, which I cannot discuss here (but which I have commented upon in Sissa 2008), the most significant recent contributions are: Blondell 2006 (on the connection between Socrates' *atopos* character, and his ubiquitous position in different moments of the erotic experience); Sheffield 2009: 44-224 (on *eros* and the quest for the good life); Belfiore 2012: 140-160 (for a thorough textual investigation, especially attentive to the language of erotic initiation); Luchelli 2012: 105-138 (for a timely reconsideration of Diotima's female voice, and intelligence of love).

38 — The choice of Agathon as the target of Socrates' refutation calls for an explanation. "Agathon's speech, writes Frisbee Sheffield, may well have been picked out for elenctic scrutiny because Agathon is the most conceited of the symposiasts". Sheffield concedes, however, that Agathon is also the only speaker who clarifies "the nature of the subject". This latter consideration is crucial to David Sedley's interpretation, which I will discuss *infra*. I agree that Agathon is presented as the master of the house, and the successful playwright, who draws everyone's attention. But I would characterize him as the most admired and the most enthused of the symposiasts, rather than "the most conceited" (Sheffield 2009: 35).

39 — On the attribution of the *aretai* to the object of praise, as a requirement of the genre, see Dover 1980: 12.

40 — *Ibid.*, 194 a-197 c. For a thorough examination of the content of the speech, and its many literary allusions, which contribute to its epideictic strategy, see: Belfiore 2012: 134-137.

πότερον ἔχων αὐτὸ οὐ ἐπιθυμεῖ τε καὶ ἐρᾷ, εἴτα ἐπιθυμεῖ τε καὶ ἐρᾷ,
ἢ οὐκ ἔχων;
οὐκ ἔχων, ὥς τὸ εἰκός γε, φάναι⁴¹.

The exchange between Agathon and Socrates subverts the rhetoric of praise, I said, by provoking a contradiction in Agathon's beliefs, as it always occurs, in an *elenchos*. This is why Agathon, the most enthusiastic admirer of love, is also the most vulnerable interlocutor for Socrates. But Socrates operates in a manner, made to measure for Agathon: for his persona, as a poet. The refutation betrays a particularly keen awareness of language. From the memory of what is usually said (*eipein*), to the semantic content of the sentences (*eros* is synonymous of *epithumia*), to the constraints of the syntax (*epithumein* and *eran* call for a genitive), and because Socrates produces a redefinition of what is meant by "*eros*", Socrates proceeds metalinguistically. This is where Jacques Lacan's commentary on the *Symposium* proves heuristic. Socrates puts Agathon to the test of the very language the two interlocutors are speaking. Meaning and grammar amount to the "law of the signifier". For Lacan, Socrates uses the dialogue, precisely because he speaks on behalf of that law⁴².

But there is more, I will argue, to this full immersion in the dialogical situation. Socrates and Agathon are both conscious of the vocal, resounding component of a sign. There is a purely musical resonance, in the text I have just quoted, which contributes to Agathon's refutation. This has been missed in previous interpretations. I will comment on it, in a moment. But to identify this echo requires that, in the first place, we come to appreciate Agathon's style, instead of discarding it as a piece of sophistry. Such appreciation takes a detour via Plato's casting and writing.

Agathon's style is emphatically poetic. At some point, Agathon has felt compelled to switch from prose to meter, he announces, in order to compose a proper hymn to *Eros*: to the god himself, as the one who "does" so much for us⁴³. This hymn offers an acrobatic show of rhythmic symmetry, but also of verbal variations. Even more strikingly, the selection and combination of words creates resonances and repetitions. We

41 — *Ibid.*, 200 a.

42 — Lacan 1991 & 2001: 400. See Luchelli 2012: 89-113. Luchelli offers a most interesting discussion of Lacan's interpretation, and of French scholarship on the *Symposium* (especially Léon Robin and Luc Brisson). I disagree, however, on his emphasis on Socrates' "panne", with Agathon. As a metalinguistical operation, the *elenchos* is indeed successful. And Socrates convenes Diotima's souvenir, not because he would not know how to continue his refutation, and how to articulate his own speech on *eros*. He has already learned his lesson, allegedly from Diotima. Diotima has already revealed to him a different paradigm of desire: opening up, as opposed to possessing. Socrates does with Agathon what he can do *with him*: to entrap him in his words, metalinguistically (by prompting him to produce a definition), but also poetically.

43 — *Ibid.*, 197 c: ἐπέρχεται δέ μοι τι καὶ ἔμμετρον εἰπεῖν ὅτι οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ ποιῶν...

can enjoy them, in the elegant translation by Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodroff:

“This is how I think of Love, Phaedrus: first, he is himself the most beautiful and the best; after that, if anyone else is at all like that, Love is responsible. I am suddenly struck by a need to say something in poetic meter, that it is he who

“Gives peace to men and stillness to the sea, lays winds to rest and careworn men to sleep”.

Love fills us with togetherness and drains all of our divisiveness away. Love calls gatherings like these together. In feasts, in dances, in ceremonies, he gives the lead. Love moves us to mildness, removes from us wildness. He is giver of kindness, never of meanness. Gracious, kindly – let wise men see and gods admire! Treasure to lovers, envy to others, father of elegance, luxury, delicacy, grace yearning, desire. Love cares well for good men, cares not for bad ones. In pain, in fear, in desire, or speech Love is our best guide and guard; he is our comrade and our savior. Ornament of all gods and men, most beautiful leader and the best! Every man should follow Love, sing beautifully his hymns, and join with him in the song he sings that charms the mind of god or man”.

If we now look at the Greek, we can see, in bold characters, the correspondences and the alliterations:

“Οὕτως ἐμοὶ δοκεῖ, ὦ Φαῖδρε, ἔρως πρῶτος αὐτὸς ὢν **κάλλιστος** καὶ **ἄριστος** μετὰ τοῦτο τοῖς ἄλλοις ἄλλων τοιούτων αἴτιος εἶναι. ἐπέρχεται δέ μοι τι καὶ ἔμμετρον εἰπεῖν, ὅτι οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ ποιῶν “**εἰρήνην** μὲν ἐν ἀνθρώποις, πελάγει δὲ **γαλήνην νηνεμίαν, ἀνέμων** κοίτην ὕπνον τ’ ἐνὶ κήδει”. οὗτος δὲ ἡμᾶς **ἀλλοτριότητος μὲν κενοῖ, οἰκειότητος δὲ πληροῖ**, τὰς τοιάσδε συνόδους μετ’ ἀλλήλων πάσας τιθεῖς συνιέναι, **ἐν ἑορταῖς, ἐν χοροῖς, ἐν θυσίαισι** γιγνόμενος ἡγεμῶν: **πραότητα μὲν πορίζων, ἀγριότητα δ’ ἐξορίζων: φιλόδωρος εὐμενείας, ἄδωρος δυσμενείας: ἴλεως ἀγαθός: θεατὸς σοφοῖς, ἀγαστὸς θεοῖς: ζηλωτὸς ἀμοίροις, κτητὸς εὐμοίροις:** τρυφῆς, ἀβρότητος, χλιδῆς, χαρίτων, ἱμέρου, πόθου πατήρ: **ἐπιμελὴς ἀγαθῶν, ἀμελὴς κακῶν: ἐν πόνῳ, ἐν φόβῳ, ἐν πόθῳ, ἐν λόγῳ κυβερνήτης, ἐπιβάτης, παραστάτης** τε καὶ σωτὴρ ἄριστος, συμπάντων τε θεῶν καὶ ἀνθρώπων κόσμος, ἡγεμῶν **κάλλιστος καὶ ἄριστος, ὃ χρὴ** ἔπεσθαι πάντα ἄνδρα ἐφνυνοῦντα καλῶς, ὥδῃς μετέχοντα ἣν ἄδει θέλγων πάντων θεῶν τε καὶ ἀνθρώπων νόημα⁴⁴.

Agathon is a virtuoso of the signifier. Socrates plays to that.

In this reading of the *Symposium*, without being “Lacanian”, since I am not following Lacan’s commentary step by step, I intend to bring

44 — *Symposium*, 197 c-e.

into focus the vivid consciousness of language, on which the structure of the dialogue hinges. I even want to go beyond Lacan's take on Socrates' allegiance to the law of the signifier. Agathon is into music. He literally plays with words (*paidia*)⁴⁵, he makes their echoes resound, and he makes their meaning audible, in the vocal recurrences that bind the sentences. There is not only meter here; there is a tentative, experimental invention of rhyme. Agathon's creativity, his not relying upon the mythological tradition, extends to a plastic, melodious interpretation of his *lalangue*. He sounds original in giving form to the expression as well as to the content of his poetry. We may be tempted to despise his style, precisely because it is so playful: metaphoric, redundant, alliterative and scanned. Agathon, we could simply say, is the parody of a sophist. Socrates compares him to Gorgias, as we will see in moment. But this is no ordinary sophist. Agathon is a poet, so much so that, in order to do justice to *Eros*, he cannot resist shifting to meter⁴⁶. And with meter, comes that profusion of rhetorical exploits.

Instead of dismissing this style as flowery and superficial, let us look at the literary theory that can best describe Agathon's *paidia*: Roman Jakobson's insightful definition of the "poetic function". Jakobson has become obsolete in the theoretical landscape, especially in Classics. But it is from his typology of the different functions of language (in turn developed from Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistics), that Jacques Lacan and Claude Lévi-Strauss could elaborate their structural vision of *langue* and *parole*; selection and combination; syntagmatic and paradigmatic; metaphor and metonymy. Again, I am not a follower of structuralism here: I am using a concept because it is heuristic. Poetry, Jakobson argued, is a form of discourse, a "message" that is, which draws attention predominantly to itself: not to the world, not to the speaker or the addressee, not to the channel of communication, and not to the language, but to its own fabric. This is why the *recherché* choice and the elaborate juxtaposition of words, in genres that we consider poetic. More precisely, a poetic utterance contains – in sequence – linguistic units that are available in the language, as interconnected and substitutable elements. These units may be analogous or opposite in all sorts of ways, but they are always "equivalent", because liable to permutation. Poetry indulges in exploring, and exposing, their "equivalence", in the text itself. In Jakobson's felicitous formula, poetry projects the "axis of selection" onto the "axis of combi-

45 — *Symposium*, 197 c-197 e.

46 — "Agathon is a poet, not just a Gorgianic orator. At 197 c he quotes two lines of verse and Dover has pointed out that in 197 d-e nearly all the cola can be scanned as metrical units from Greek lyric poetry, a feature not found in the surviving fragments of Gorgias" (Sheppard 2008: 35). See Dover 1997: 171. I am grateful to Dr. Mattia De Poli, who, in a personal communication, has confirmed the metrical composition of the passage.

nation". By design, poems are composed of rhythmically recurring lines. Lines are made up of words that are either opposite or similar, in meaning or in sound. Their semantic connections and their acoustic reverberations contribute, in an essential manner, to the meaning of the poem⁴⁷.

"The verbal material, writes Linda Waugh, displays overall a hierarchical structure of symmetries, based on repetitions, regularities, and systematizations of various kinds. There is, in other words, a radical parallelistic reorientation of all the verbal material as it relates to the building of the sequence [...]. Moreover such parallelisms create a network of internal relations within the poem itself, making the poem into an integrated whole and underlining the poem's relative autonomy"⁴⁸.

If we read Agathon's hymn to *Eros*, through the prism of Jakobson's poetic function, we find exactly that: "a radical parallelistic reorientation of all the verbal material". The *Hymn to Love* comes across as a synoptic table of interchangeable attributes, reinforcing each other, thanks to the overabundant reiteration of concepts and syllables. Through isocolon (such as ἀλλοτριότητος μὲν κενοῖ, οἰκειότητος δὲ πληροῖ; πράοτητα μὲν πορίζων, ἀγριότητα δ' ἐξορίζων); homoiopoton (such as ἐν ἑορταῖς, ἐν χοροῖς, ἐν θυσίαισι; ἐν πόνῳ, ἐν φόβῳ, ἐν πόθῳ, ἐν λόγῳ), and homoioteleuton or near rhyme (such as θεατὸς σοφοῖς, ἀγαστὸς θεοῖς; ζηλωτὸς ἀμοίροις, κτητὸς εὐμοίροις), and through relentless antithesis (ἀλλοτριότητος/οἰκειότητος; κενοῖ/πληροῖ; ἐπιμελής/ἀμελής; ἀγαθῶν/κακῶν; πράοτητα/ἀγριότητα; φιλόδωρος/ἄδωρος; εὐμενείας/δυσμενείας) this poem draws a lot of attention to itself, indeed. And this overbearing presence of the text as a text is *meaningful*: it conveys Agathon's intent to fill up *Eros* with beauty and goodness – not their opposites.

To expose the cultural echoes in Agathon's *logos*, Socrates evokes Gorgias, I said, whose *Praise of Helen* displays the same figures of speech⁴⁹. The two *logoi* show a number of significant similarities. They are both epideictic exploits. Listening to Agathon's speech, Socrates says, one could only be struck, τίς οὐκ ἂν ἐξεπλάγη ἀκούων⁵⁰. Discourses, Gorgias claims, through a visual metaphor, "strike" their listeners⁵¹. Both Gorgias and Agathon end their encomia – of Helen and of *Eros* – with a brief interpretative direction: it was a half-joke⁵². In the *Symposium*,

47 — Jakobson 1956; 1960: 350-377.

48 — Waugh 1980: 64.

49 — Consigny 2001. Aristotle's *Rhetoric* mentions disapprovingly Gorgias' poetic prose, 3, 3, 1-4.

50 — Plato, *Symposium*, 198 b.

51 — Gorgias, *Helen*, 16. Segal: 107-108.

52 — Gorgias, *Helen*, 21: ἐβουλήθην γράψαι τὸν λόγον Ἑλένης μὲν ἐγκώμιον, ἐμὸν δὲ

Socrates plays with Gorgias' name. Gorgias' speech, Γοργίου ὁ λόγος, has the same effects as the head of the Gorgon, Γοργίου κεφαλὴν. The petrifying monster has popped up, before his eyes⁵³! With his words, *onomata*, and his phrases, *rhemata*, Agathon is such a master of rhetorical charm! Who would not be struck by their beauty? Words work magic.

The *Symposium* makes the connection between Gorgias and Agathon explicit⁵⁴. But we should add that Agathon's prose and poetry resonate with the style of another philosopher of language, featured in one of Plato's dialogues: Cratylus. In Greek, "Eros" resonates with "Ares". *Eros* conquers Ares, not vice versa, Agathon claims: οὐ γὰρ ἔχει ἔρωτα Ἄρης, ἀλλ' ἔρωσ' Ἄρη⁵⁵. This is not an etymological pun, since Agathon is not trying to explain the name of *Eros*, but the paronomasia is very similar to those we find in the *Cratylus*. For Cratylus (via Socrates' interpretation) words did say something; something that was not outside, in the world, but inside them, in the very texture and arrangement of the phone-mes – something that was just other words. In the dialogue, Cratylus is introduced as the champion of the "correctness of names" as opposed to Hermogenes' conventionalist vision of language. He is supposed to think that a lemma is grounded in "nature", *phusis*. His allegedly naturalistic linguistics, however, tracks down components, derivations, phonematic or graphic changes that occurred in time. Once we go beyond *grammata* and their physical echoes (such as the one between "rho" and "flowing"), and we listen to *onomata*, we find ourselves in a self-contained, diachronic dictionary. With Gorgias, Cratylus shares an aesthetic of *logos* as malleable, self-sufficient and powerful. The signifier fashions and refashions meaning. There are other words in a word; there is another language in a language.

An eloquent example of the layers of language is the lexicon of desire:

"The name ἔμερος (longing) was given to the stream (ῥοῦς) which most draws the soul; for because it flows with a rush (ἰέμενος) and with a desire for things and thus draws the soul on through the impulse of its flowing, all this power gives it the name of ἔμερος. And the word πόθος (yearning) signifies that it pertains not to that which is present, but to that which is elsewhere (ἄλλοθί που) or absent, and therefore the same feeling which is called ἔμερος when its object is present, is called πόθος when it is absent. And ἔρωσ (love) is so called because it flows in (ἔσρει) from without, and this flowing is not inherent in him who has it, but is

παίγνιον; Plato, *Symposium*, 197 e: οὗτος, ἔφη, ὁ παρ' ἐμοῦ λόγος, ὦ Φαίδρε, τῷ θεῷ ἀνακείσθω, τὰ μὲν παιδιᾶς, τὰ δὲ σπουδῆς μετρίως, καθ' ὅσον ἐγὼ δύναμαι, μετέχων.

53 — Gorgias' head reminds us of Protagoras' head, in the *Thaetetus*. Cf. Ford 1994.

54 — Hunter 2004; Sheppard 2008: 28-40.

55 — Plato, *Symposium*, 196 d.

introduced through the eyes; for this reason it was in ancient times called ἔσπος, from ἐσπεῖν – for we used to employ omicron instead of omega – but now it is called ἔρως through the change of omicron to omega. Well, what more is there that you want to examine”⁵⁶?

Himeros/rhein: the semantic similarity is palpable. *Eros/esros*: these are, perceptibly, the same thing. Cratylus’ glosses establish paradigmatic equivalences, ready to use in a poetic discourse.

Agathon is not alone, therefore, in enjoying the pleasure of a language that is never transparent, but always perceptible as that particular language; of composing sentences that draw attention to the “installation” of the words, so to speak, in that particular sequence. He belongs in the league of Gorgias and Cratylus. But he is in even better company, actually. Socrates himself could play the same game. When, in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates launches into a parody of inspired eloquence, he evokes “the unreasoning desire that overpowers a person’s intention to do right and is driven to take pleasure in beauty, its force reinforced by its kindred desires for beauty in human bodies – this desire, all-conquering in its forceful drive, takes its name from the word for force, *rhōmē*, and is called *Eros*”⁵⁷. *Rhōmē/Eros*: just listen! The transfer of meaning is music to your ears. You cannot miss the tune. Socrates too is a virtuoso of the signifier. This too is part of his *eironeia*. Plato had been, Aristotle tells us, a pupil of Cratylus and had retained his Heraclitean, liquid ontology, as far as the senses were concerned⁵⁸. Cratylus’ views on language were consistent with it, and Socrates’ argument against him, at the end of the homonymous dialogue, was precisely that we have to step out of the stream of words (all those flowing “rho”) and look up, at the Forms.

It takes a sophist to catch a sophist. His unbridled, garrulous linguistics is precisely what makes of Agathon the ideal prey for Socrates, when the old fox joins in the conversation, only to operate his usual trick: to redirect conventional chatter, in this case praise, into a much more ambiguous, unsettling discourse. Agathon’s speech was beautiful, in tune with the man himself⁵⁹. “May I put a couple of little questions to Agathon?”

56 — Plato, *Cratylus*, 419 e-420 b. For a serious reading of Socrates’ etymologies, on behalf of Cratylus, see Sedley 1998: 140-154.

57 — Plato, *Phaedrus*, 238 b.

58 — Aristotle, *Metaphysics* A 6, 987 a: “In his youth Plato first became acquainted with Cratylus and the Heraclitean doctrines – that the whole sensible world is always in a state of flux, and that there is no scientific knowledge of it – and in after years he still held these opinions”. David Sedley does not make this connection between Agathon and Cratylus, but he argues for Socrates’ affinity with Cratylus, and Plato’s early proximity to him, (about sensible things being in flux as well as the “correctness of names” (Sedley 1998: 140-154; quotation: 146).

59 — Plato, *Symposium*, 198 a: ὡς πρεπόντως τοῦ νεανίσκου εἰρηκότος καὶ αὐτῷ καὶ τῷ θεῷ. The young man has spoken in a manner that is fitting to himself and to the god.

he asks disingenuously⁶⁰. This, we have seen, is the beginning of the end. With that couple of questions, Socrates renders null and void that exclusive attribution of beauty, and only beauty, to *Eros*, and only *Eros*. The uniqueness of Love evaporates, together with his plenitude.

Now, after reading the text, with an ear to Agathon's music, we can better appreciate the tipping point of the *elenchos*. This is a question that never stops puzzling Plato's interpreters, as we will see in a moment. If, Socrates asks, *being Eros*, *Eros does* what his name says he does, then isn't it the case that *Eros era*, that Love loves? But then he must be missing/ lacking something... The argument here emerges, purely and simply, from language: from the awareness of that genitive (*eros* of something), and from the metalinguistical operation of defining and re-defining, but even more basically, from the sliding of the noun *Eros* into the verb *eran*. It is a matter of sound. Agathon's vulnerability to Socrates depends not only on his uncritical encomium of Love, therefore, but also on his alliterative, rhymed style. Agathon's musical *logos* is where Socrates plants his wedge, in order to make the heap of compliments crumble.

Let us just think about it: why on earth should the god of love, love? His mission is to make *you* love, not to suffer his own power. Therefore, if *Eros era*, it is in jest and in Greek. Language speaks, indeed. A language speaks, actually. The joke is translatable into German, as *Die Liebe liebt*, or into English, as *Love loves*, but in French (unless in a *Seminar* by Jacques Lacan) "*Amour amoureux*" would fall flat. Socrates does nothing but make Agathon aware of what he ends up saying. The *elenchos* is a method intended to make you talk, so that you can listen to yourself, what you are saying, and what your words are saying. *Eros era*. Theory is happening here and now, in real time! And Agathon just hears himself say it. In his own words. In his own style. He comes to that point in two movements.

Firstly, as we have seen, Agathon is the only participant in the *Symposium* who shifts praise from love as a human experience to Love; from the verb (*eran*) to the noun *eros*, more precisely to the name of *Eros*. In Agathon's flowing idiom, *Eros* becomes a subject: the grammatical subject of a torrent of phrases that detail his qualities. The god, we have seen, is showered with adjectives and adverbs that are all flattering and superlative. But Agathon also describes what *Eros* does. The god is the cause, the *aitios* of all sort of human and divine activities. Secondly, among *Eros'* many doings, Agathon is fated to include *eran*. As a poet who cannot resist an echo, when asked if *Eros* must be *Eros* of something, therefore if *Eros epithumei*, therefore if *Eros era*, Agathon falls into the trap. Yes, he readily admits, Love loves, *Eros era*. The god must also be the subject of

60 — Plato, *Symposium*, 199 b.

his own desire, desire for an object – which is obviously not there. That was a beautiful speech, Socrates acknowledges, which reflects the beauty of its author, good Agathon himself. But again: if this is the case, how could Agathon say that *Eros* is the subject of all those attributions of quality, firstly beauty? *Eros* cannot have beauty; cannot be beautiful. I did not know what I was saying, Agathon obliges⁶¹. Next twist, enters the voice of Diotima, with another story about little *Eros*, the child of Poverty and Resource, always indigent, always craving, yearning, longing, lusting after; always fleeting in between. But this, precisely, is another story. For the time being, Socrates has outsmarted Agathon at the game of making language speak, of squeezing truth out of words: words the sound of which makes an argument; words, the grammar of which makes a case.

Socrates' thread of questions has alerted Plato's analytic readers. "The logic of this argument, wrote R. E. Allen, is obscured by the personification of *Eros*, and an ambiguity in the word 'beauty'. Love is a relation. As such, it lacks nothing and desires nothing. It implies, however, privation or lack in the lover. But when one distinguishes love and the lover, this argument to show that *Eros* is neither good nor beautiful nor divine is inconclusive. The lover, who lacks and is by so much imperfect, cannot be divine. But it does not follow from this that love itself is not divine or good"⁶². Socrates refutation, therefore, is based on an equivocation and on a *non sequitur*.

Along the same line, Luca Castagnoli subsequently argued that Socrates' argument is flawed, whereas Agathon falls prey to a rhetorical and cultural ambiguity. Socrates plays with the "profound grammar" of his sentences: he attributes to *Eros*, Love, what can only affect a lover. In so doing, Castagnoli points out, Socrates uses systematically a stylistic device, which Gregory Vlastos had identified in Plato's dialogues: "Pauline predication", so called, because it was used by Paul of Tarsus, especially in his 1st *Epistle to the Corinthians*. This consists of replacing the logical subject of a proposition (in this case: "lovers") with a grammatical subject which is an abstract noun (in this case: "Love"). In Socrates' questions to Agathon, all the qualities and actions predicated of *Eros* only make sense if they are understood metaphorically – as the actions and the qualities of those who love. For Castagnoli, Agathon himself does understand the "Pauline" meaning: this is why he does not object to the fallacious claim that Love desires and loves, literally. But the poet is also convinced of *Eros*' double nature, as an abstract, Pauline, personification, *and as a god*: this is why he ends up uttering contradictory sentences such as Love is beautiful (the god); Love desire beauty (lovers); Love is not beautiful

61 — Plato, *Symposium*, 201 b.

62 — Allen 1966: 460.

(the god). Socrates deliberately exploits the ambivalence of *Eros*' double nature. His cross-examination is misleading. If we want to reconcile this eristic, unscrupulous ability with the Socratic and Platonic commitment to truth, we must replace the *elenchos* in the sequence of the speeches. It prepares us for Diotima's theory of love as a *daimon*, not a god. It ought to be read from that standpoint⁶³. Socrates needs to expose, in a negative dialectical moment, the absurdity of believing that Love is a god.

In contrast with these interpretations, David Sedley starts from Socrates' claim that, in the past, he himself used to think exactly like Agathon. Then a woman from Mantinea submitted him to a thorough interrogation, and made him change his mind. Agathon, Sedley argues, is cast as a sub-Socrates: someone who cannot be utterly dense, frighteningly frivolous or superficially conventional, but who is simply a bit behind – although on the right track. There is, in Agathon's erotic vision, space for improvement. But, between the poet and the philosopher, there is also a deep-seated complicity. Agathon has "recognized Love itself, and not lovers as the true subject of the verb "to love"": far from being a fallacy, or, as Castagnoli would put it, a "Pauline predication", this, for David Sedley, is in tune with Plato's views on metaphysical causation⁶⁴. What causes an individual to bear an attribute is the presence, in that individual, of what the attribute is in itself, with no qualifications: the Form. The Form is responsible for how things and people are: these are beautiful, because of Beauty. But the Form itself is the "primary bearer of an attribute". Beauty is beautiful: this is why it makes bodies and souls beautiful. This causation can be extended to all concepts. "If you desire something, your doing so is secondary to, and caused by, the presence in you of the relevant desire, itself the primary subject of the desiring"⁶⁵. It is Agathon's "enhanced appreciation of causal structures" that makes him close enough to Socrates, as a respondent.

Agathon is quite right, but not entirely. The refutation will expose "a mistake that even an inexperienced Socrates might make". Agathon reasons correctly when, before listing *Eros*' doings, he describes his characteristics. He errs, however, because he fails to offer, at the outset, a proper definition of what he is talking about⁶⁶. Agathon never says who, or what, Love is. Inevitably, he will contradict himself, by attributing to the god qualities that are not compatible with his essential nature, which is wanting, desiring, thus lacking. It is Diotima who will make a good start, by defining *Eros* firstly genealogically as a *daimon*, and then func-

63 — Castagnoli 2001.

64 — Sedley 1998: 114-132.

65 — D. Sedley 2006: 56.

66 — *Ibid.*, 53.

tionally as longing. Agathon falls short of grounding his argument, and yet he will have opened the way. He will have established the connection between desire, beauty, goodness and the virtues, which becomes crucial in Diotima's speech; he will have acknowledged the compelling reasons why Love must be thought, not as possession, but as open-ended aspiration, which Diotima will reorient toward immortality. Furthermore, David Sedley insists, Agathon, the poet, pays tribute to the creativity of *Eros*, the inventor of all the arts and technologies. Again, Diotima takes that compliment one step higher. For her, the little *daimon* will inspire all sorts of *poiesis*, to be sure, but his greatest merit is to take us to the culmination of human knowledge: philosophy.

Luca Castagnoli is right about the entanglements created by Socrates' play on *Eros* and *eros*, but David Sedley's contextualization of Agathon's thinking, within Plato's language, opens up an entirely new reading of the *Symposium*. For the reasons I hope to have successfully outlined, I would only take more seriously the linguistic awareness of that language. The aptly named Agathon is, indeed, the one who understands that love has to do with goodness. The rhyming poet is, indeed, the best player at the *paidia* of words and phrases. The gorgianesque playwright is, indeed, the one who takes up the challenge to praise *Love*, literally – not Aphrodite, not people in love, not love's effects. It is not his *Hymn to Love* as a Platonic Form, however, that includes that primary attribution – if Love makes you love, he must be loving. *Eros era*: it is actually Socrates who says so, and leads the poet to acknowledge that. As I argued, it is Agathon's devotion to the signifier, a passion so emphatically displayed in his ornate performance, that makes him liable to agree. It is his compliance to the laws of grammar that persuades him that *Eros* cannot be said to be *kalos*. The poet's ostentatious sensitivity to echoing words, matching phrases and musical meter focalizes, in the *Symposium*, his unique skill. If Agathon is a sub-Socrates, it is because he is a "logo-logical" thinker, to borrow Barbara Cassin's idiom⁶⁷. His ground-play is language. And Socrates plays with him.

If this interpretation sounds too French, too frivolous, and too indulgent towards Agathon's belletrism, let us remember how Socrates deals with Gorgias. As Brad Levett has shown, Socrates applies a similarly bespoke refutation to Gorgias, in the homonymous dialogue: he asks a thread of questions based on a rhetorical figure, the poluptoton, "the repetition of a word in different cases and/or genders, in order to add persuasive

67 — Cassin 1995. For a different take on the question "why Agathon?", see Stokes 1986; Sheffield 2009: 34–39. These discussions aim at taking Agathon seriously, notwithstanding his imperfect (muddled) wisdom, as it transpires in the encomium (the connection between *eros* and beauty) and in the *elenchos*.

force". This is a "verbal maneuver", which persuades without telling the truth. It can only work if the interlocutor takes the bait. "Socrates defeats the fictional Gorgias, Levett argues, by using a rhetorical figure closely associated with the historical Gorgias himself"⁶⁸.

To take Agathon's flowery eloquence a bit less sneeringly than usual – since it is admittedly a show of *paidia*, but not only that⁶⁹ – allows us to understand his exceptional role in the *Symposium*. It also prepares us better to understand why it is so important for Plato to rescue beautiful Agathon, from the comedic vilification of his sensuality. We will examine this transition in detail, but, to conclude the first section of this paper, let me insist on what is at stake, in Socrates' complicitous and respectful involvement with this man, who is so alien to the most normative tenants of Plato's metaphysics. Agathon's refutation is not just a passing instance of Socratic wit. The *Symposium*, it is true, takes place in an especially cheerful atmosphere. With Agathon, all the symposiasts share a moment of unabashed enjoyment of the talking feast. Host and guests, including Socrates, have a good time, together. That is the beauty of what, at this point of Agathon's night, is *happening*. But the event of encountering Socrates and being unsettled at his contact, is endlessly reenacted in different circumstances, one dialogue after the other. In Plato's series, the protagonist, Socrates, has to start his inquiry all over again in every single episode⁷⁰. The philosopher has to go back to the cave – or to the gymnasium, or to the symposium, or to the Piraeus, or out of town in the countryside – and resume the conversation, on different topics, but with the same intent to define and redefine knowledge, friendship, justice, piety or love. It is only by speaking that Socrates' interlocutors can learn, or unlearn, or at least be provoked to doubt. Back to the cave means back to the game of words: the only way out of a theatre of shadows. But then Socrates must be able to speak the language of his interlocutors – without ever saying the same things. And he has to share some basic experience that is common and familiar for them. Something they know in deeds, and can relate to in words.

That experience is *eros*. The young men Socrates meets in the *palaistra*, or in various Athenian venues, are lovers. They are *erotikoi*. Their being involved in *eros* makes them knowledgeable about two things: how their desire moves from one person to another, and how that transitive desire is made into words. To desire is to praise. A boy with a snub nose, you will

68 — Levett 2005: 216, 217, 218.

69 — "This is, delightfully, the most comic of these six speeches", writes Alexander Nehamas (1989: XVII). This is the only point on which I do not entirely agree with his brief and brilliant reading of the dialogue.

70 — On Socrates' repeated, collaborative and constructive use of irony, especially in the context of a dialogue on praise, see Nightingale 1993.

say that he is “charming”; another one is “regal”, because his nose looks like an eagle’s beak; of a third one, whose nose is in between, you will claim that he is “well proportioned”. A boy who is tanned, you will insist that he looks “manly”; one with a fair skin, for you, is “a god’s child”. For any young thing who catches your eyes, you will find a flattering name⁷¹.

This passage of the *Republic*, buried in a text that does not belong to the canonical sources on *eros* and friendship, offers a greatly underestimated key to Plato’s theory of love. Much more famously, Diotima articulates a similar argument on the transfer of desire from one beautiful body to another, from one beautiful soul to another, and ultimately to “the beautiful”, *to kalon*, the form of Beauty. But in the *Republic*, Socrates does something less grandiose and more significant: he draws attention to what happens to his Athenian *erotikoi* acquaintances, all the time, and just because they are *erotikoi*. *In situ* and at slow pace, without rushing up the ladder of philosophy, Socrates reminds Glaucon of what he and his friends normally feel, and, most importantly, of how they translate their feelings into phrases and compliments: *logoi* and *epainos*. The spoken experience of *eros* is the starting point of intellectual awakening. The *Lysis* offers a starker lesson on how one should turn from praise to truth. But praise is the spontaneous expression of desire, for those highly civilized youth. And Socrates knows how to linger in that dialogic time, in that erotic space.

This explains Socrates’ paradoxical involvement in the *poikilos* game of male love, as Pausanias depicts it. He behaves as an *erastes*, he even becomes an *eromenos* – without having sex with anyone. He acts as he were smitten by their beauty, but he is perfectly capable of retaining his sexual response, as Alcibiades’ inebriated narrative makes clear. He flirts like a heavenly suitor, but, at the very last minute, when it should be most difficult, he refuses to go all the way. François Roustang has argued that “Socrates’ secret” resides in his ability to cultivate a form of wisdom, embedded in the body, so that sex is an option for him, but not a necessity⁷². I would situate this capacity of Socrates in its context: Athenian erotic culture. Socrates’ project is to reach out to his young friends for the sake of philosophy, but, to do so, he has to start somewhere. He has to go where they hang out. More to the point, he has to place himself at their emotional and cultural level, where they begin to discern what they are living, saying, and thinking. Their erotic discourses are the promising terrain, where *eros* and *philia* can turn to *philosophia*. A linguistic complicity, an erotic complicity: up to the point where Socrates draws the line, only to come back among his dear boys, for more conversation, more erotic

71 — Plato, *Republic*, V, 474 d-475 a.

72 — Roustang 2009.

teasing. Here, at the party, Socrates is even drinking their wine – without getting drunk. A complete hedonic complicity, made of courtship, words and wine, binds him to the other guests, and to the master of the house: Agathon, the quintessential *erotikos*, the personification of *eros* bespoke.

And Agathon

We can appreciate the refinement of Socrates' host if we place him in contrast with a very different portrait. The virtuoso of the signifier has, for us, an extra-platonic existence. Aristophanes, the other literary celebrity at the drinking party, had cast Agathon as one of his characters, on stage. He had even shown in full light, before the Athenian people, crowded in the theatre of Dionysos, the interior of the poet's home. In the *Thesmophoriazusae*, a play produced in 411 BCE, the action begins with a very nervous Euripides who, because he has been exposing, in so many of his plays, the vices of women (especially their ability to cheat on their sleepy husbands) will now be punished. A gynocratic assembly will gather that very day, during the religious festival in honour of Demeter Thesmophoros, a strictly female, secret ritual, from which men are excluded. This is a total disaster. Euripides intends to ask his fellow poet, Agathon, to infiltrate the meeting, listen to the speeches delivered and, above all, try to dissuade the group from condemning the creator of Helen and Phaedra. Agathon, he explains, will be skilful as well as undetectable. He looks like a woman⁷³.

The *ekkuklema* turns, Agathon appears, elegantly lying on a sofa, and composing a choral song. Here is the epiphany of the poet – visual, verbal and musical. With Euripides, to greet Agathon, there is on stage an Inlaw of Euripides himself: a rustic, rough, hairy Athenian⁷⁴. Inlaw welcomes the languid artist with a sequel of loud exclamations and rowdy questions. "Where do you come from, you, the *gunnis*, the she-male?" How confusing, he protests, is this *taraxis tou biou*, this troubling confusion of life! A musical instrument, the *barbitos* talks (*lalei*) to the saffron tunic; a skin, to the net that women wear on their head. What? An oil vase (used in the gymnasium) goes with a girdle? How incongruous! What is this association of a mirror and a sword? Is this a man? But then where is the

73 — Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazusae*, 92; cf. 191-92. Agathon's appearance and his mimetic handling of women's apparel have drawn a lot of scholarly attention in the last thirty years. See Zeitlin 1981 & 1996; Muecke 1982; Mureddu 1982-83; Paduano 1982; Said 1987; Zimmermann 1988; Mazzacchera 1999; Pretagostini 1997; Calame 1999: 135; Stehle 2002; Saetta-Cottone 2003; Duncan 2006; Given 2007; Tasinato 2009; McLure 2009.

74 — Inlaw, says Agathon's servant, is *agroiotas* (58). On this attribute, see Voelcke 2004.

prick (*peos*)? Where are the Laconian boots? Where is the cloak? Is this a woman? But then where are the tits (*titthia*)⁷⁵?

Inlaw starts at a picture that deeply mystifies him, at two levels: the social, behavioural and sartorial coding of what we call gender, on the one hand; the fabric of the body, on the other. Agathon's wardrobe is cacophonous. Agathon's anatomy is perplexing. "Aristophanes presents Agathon, Ann Duncan writes, as an ontological puzzle for the kinsman"⁷⁶. As a montage of garments, accessories and organs, sexual difference should be evident, straightforward and readable: this is what matters for the average male. This is what he expects. The play starts from this expectation, before morphing into a complicated paratragedy where cross-dressing and the cosmetic arrangement of gender takes over, only to come full circle.

We might be inclined to zoom on Agathon's androgynous epiphany at the beginning of the play, but to forget about the poet, once the *ekkuklema* wheels him off stage. But we should take into consideration the entire development of the action. Only by following the vicissitudes of Inlaw, we can appreciate the contrast between the acting playwright and his simple-minded spectator. And only by taking the full measure of this contrast, we can grasp what Aristophanes makes of Agathon.

Instead of Agathon, it is Inlaw, the macho male, who attends the Thesmophoria in woman's garb. He will be rapidly unmasked. Like him, an Athenian man, the Athenian women consider that the body is the touch-stone of sexual identity. When they find out what lies under Inlaw's garments – his genitals and his flat chest – they send for the *prytanis*. Still wearing the saffron robe, but with his phallus in plain sight⁷⁷ and no bra, Inlaw will end up arrested and guarded by a Scythian archer, while trying to attract Euripides' attention by reciting the role of Helen and Andromeda. It is the rustic Athenian, not the glamorous poet, who plays the woman. The plot of the play can be told as the sequence of two drag performances: it opens with Agathon's deceptive mimesis and continues with Inlaw's transparent cross-dressing. In the end, female and male attributes will be reassigned to their respective subjects, woman and man. Where is the prick, where are the tits? Inlaw's questions find a definite answer. Gender will rejoin anatomy. *Peos* and *titthia* will fall into place, together with the mirror, the girdle, the hairnet, the slippers, the saffron tunics and the sword, the oil vase, and the barbitos – with no *taraxis tou biou*. The gaze of the commoner will be satisfied, at the antipodes of what a man like Agathon could represent.

75 — Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazusae*, 136-145.

76 — Duncan 2006: 35.

77 — Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazusae*, 1114.

To comprehend how the eyes of the popular beholder command the structure of the play, let us read closely. Euripides asks Agathon to go undercover among the women. Agathon refuses to do so. He will be gracious enough, however, to lend his clothes and accessories to an improbable substitute: Inlaw. This especially hirsute Athenian will undergo a dangerous session of face shaving and depilation of his crotch by fire, before wearing the diaphanous tunic color of saffron, the girdle, the slippers and the headset that he borrows from Agathon. The story-line then continues with Inlaw in drag, dealing with the Thesmophoriazousai, failing to persuade them about Euripides, and being discovered (with the help of Cleisthenes, a renowned effeminate, friend of the women). The pivotal moment is when the impostor is stripped, inspected and exposed: under the feminine apparel, and notwithstanding the smooth skin and the falsetto voice, there is a male! This is why he was defending Euripides, the women conclude.

This undressing scene⁷⁸ harks back to the initial episode, when Inlaw had acquiesced to depilation, shaving and cross-dressing. By removing his hair and by taking up Agathon's attire, the man, *aner*, had been made into a *gunnis*, a woman – at least in *eidōs*. He had made sure, however, that his penis should not be scorched. He had carefully hidden it between his legs, where it could be spotted from behind⁷⁹. Now, under the scrutiny of the women and of Cleisthenes, his phallus springs back in full view. Again, Inlaw tries to conceal it, by bending forward, but the *peōs* can be seen in the rear. He then stands tall, and the voluminous piece reappears in the front. This ballet draws dramatic attention. Cleisthenes finds it quite interesting. “Man, you have some isthmus here! You move your prick up and down, more often than the Corinthians”⁸⁰! The exhibition of the phallus follows the exposure of Inlaw's upper body. How sturdy and vigorous she looks like, this mysterious lady! And how flat! “She has no tits like us”, observes one of the women⁸¹. For a moment, Inlaw's body is puzzling. But only for a moment. Where is the prick? Where are the tits? Inlaw's queries before Agathon would still be pertinent. But with Inlaw himself, we know where we stand. The body has the last word.

On the comedic stage, the body is a protagonist. Comedy basks in the operations and exonerations of stomachs, bladders and intestines. Food, drink and sex; everything heavy and bulky, even corpses, become a matter of laughter. Comedy operates a sort of “somatization” of tragic agency. And yet, the body is not a thing. The body is a place where liquids, mem-

78 — Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazusae*, 636-645.

79 — Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazusae*, 239-242.

80 — Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazusae*, 643-648.

81 — Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazusae*, 639-640.

bers, sensations and functions meet social markers of status or difference. The body is a situation, experienced as a natural challenge (its carcass, its physiology, its sensibility) as well as a cultural performance. In the time span of the *Thesmophoriazusae*, the latter ultimately fits the former. The plot runs precisely in this direction. At the beginning, even before setting eyes on Agathon's disconcerting figure, Inlaw has already exhibited to the spectators his own physique that, as Eva Stehle has argued, was almost certainly equipped with a typical extra-large, artificial phallus. This was part of the comic costume for a male character. "Despite being a conventional piece of costume, Stehle argues, the phallus was naturalized as a sign of the masculine body"⁸². As soon as he hears about Agathon, the tragedian – the one who he is not dark, vigorous, and bearded – Inlaw threatens to use his own phallus⁸³. If the poet does not look like a tanned, muscular and hairy man, he reckons, such an effeminate man is, *ipso facto*, to be sodomized, *bineisthai*⁸⁴. Inlaw might have done so already, by the way, without even knowing it⁸⁵. Later, in the undressing scene we have just examined, the same irrepressible *peos* will bounce back. Inlaw's fake tits are gone. The real man returns to his manliness. Inlaw will remain on stage half-dressed as a woman, and will mimic Helen and Andromeda. His member will also be there, however, laid bare before the spectators and the other characters.

In her ground-breaking essay, "Travesties of genre and gender in Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae*", Froma Zeitlin had insisted on the ironic reversal that occurs between Agathon and Inlaw. It is the aggressive virile man, not the elegant poet, who ultimately goes through the entire play in drag⁸⁶. Comedy and tragedy; femininity and masculinity are constantly, and structurally, mixed up. "For in exposing the lusty comic male only in the process of becoming a woman, the comedy is playing with the extreme limit of its own promiscuous premises where all can now converge in the ambiguities of intersexuality"⁸⁷. I would add, however, that there is a difference between the two kinds of *taraxis tou biou* embodied first by Agathon and then by Inlaw. Agathon looks, and sounds, like a woman. He is an *aner*, he says, but for the time being, while he is composing a feminine chorus, he has made himself *homoios* to his characters⁸⁸. The *trompe-l'oeil* is so successful that Inlaw, having being warned that he is going to see a man, when the *ekkuklema* wheels Agathon on

82 — Stehle 2002, 376.

83 — Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazusae*, 31-50.

84 — *Ibid.*, 51.

85 — *Ibid.*, 35.

86 — Zeitlin 1981 & 1996.

87 — *Ibid.*, 309.

88 — Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazusae*, 149-167.

stage, fails to recognize him as such. “I see Cyrene!”, he exclaims, alluding to a notorious female prostitute⁸⁹. Everything speaks to the poet’s femininity, from the sofa, to the voice, to the wardrobe. Nothing allows us to believe that Agathon was wearing the fictional phallus. Only his tunic smells of a little prick, *posthion*⁹⁰. Agathon’s gender and anatomy, therefore, are deceptively intertwined. Although his softness is compatible with virility, and although he actually boasts his *andreia*, as well as his ability to morph into a woman⁹¹, on the *ekkuklema*, he looks successfully transgendered. Inlaw, on the contrary, has been constructed and deconstructed as a made-up female⁹². Freshly shaved, he looks at himself in the mirror, and sees a well-known effeminate, Cleisthenes⁹³, but he cannot deceive the women for long. Once caught and disrobed, he redisplayes his macroscopic penis and, during the second half of the play, he is obliged to keep wearing the saffron tunic on top of it. There is not suspension of disbelief about him – not even for himself⁹⁴. Inlaw’s anatomy and gender are split. The focalization on his body, in the two scenes of his cross-dressing and his stripping, compels us to see a ring-composition. In time, the plot espouses his requirements⁹⁵. The spectators will get exactly what the comedic Athenian had called for: the reassignment of gender, the triumph of anatomy.

More complicated is how Agathon and Inlaw relate to sexual drives. The play presents Agathon as languid, delicate and dressed like a woman, but the poet does not care about sex, only about poetry. It is Inlaw who

89 — Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazusae*, 97-98.

90 — Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazusae*, 254.

91 — As Frances Muecke rightly points out, “Agathon never admits that he is effeminate, or even explicitly acknowledges that he has been accused of being it, apart from his comment on the *psogos* of the Old Man (146). While Ibycus, Anacreon and Alcaeus are cited primarily to lead into the maxim of correspondence between the poet’s work and his life, it may also be relevant that they were all well known as erotic poets, and hence lovers, of the active not the passive kind. Agathon’s argument, then, is that they dressed ‘like women’ (*emitrophoroun*) and were therefore susceptible of the accusation of effeminacy, but that they did so for poetic reasons (as he does himself), not being effeminate at all” (Muecke 1982: 51). Effeminacy is in the eyes of the vulgar beholder.

92 — Slater 2002: 167.

93 — Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazusae*, 235.

94 — Eva Stehle argues that “Theatricality itself is implicated, for Aristophanes makes his point by decoupling the phallus altogether from masculine identity and showing it up as meaningless. Limp, mobile, disavowed, redefined – costume, in short – it loses its naturalized power to represent the male. Its relationship to the body beneath is arbitrary, and it fails to guarantee a stable difference between men and women” (Stehle 2002: 377). In the case of the Inlaw, however, Jeffrey Henderson is right to point out that “when, as in *Thesmo*, the audience is made privy to a disguise, the identity of the character underneath remains stable” (Henderson 2002: 505).

95 — This reading of the play is in tune with Laura McClure’s thorough investigation of Inlaw’s vicissitudes. McClure emphasizes the progressive naturalization of gender, which culminates with Inlaw’s return home, to his wife. My focus here is on the circular shape of the plot, as it originates in the initial duo between a disconcerting Agathon and a man concerned with anatomy – and ends up reassuring the latter (McClure 2009).

talks incessantly about *binein* and *bineisthai*. He is ready to sodomize Agathon, he brags, and to co-author a satyr play. At face-value his erotic response seems to fit the template of sexual activity versus sexual passivity, the former being manly and a matter of boastful pride for oneself, the latter being an insult addressed to others. And yet Inlaw seems to be touched by Agathon's sensuality, in a mimetic manner: when listening to Agathon's poems, he feels a tickling (*gargalos*), he says, in his *hedra*, his fundament⁹⁶. Agathon sings "sensuous hymns that send the kinsman into an erotic swoon (130-33)", writes Froma Zeitlin⁹⁷. But what kind of erotic swoon?

The Inlaw's response is anal arousal. It is precisely in these terms that Aristotle's *Problems* will describe males' desire for other males⁹⁸. In naturally effeminate men (*phúsei theludriai*), the tubes that carry semen to the penis and the testicles are obstructed either because of a congenital malformation or because these men are eunuchs or impotent, or because they have grown used to a pleasurable sexual activity, localized in the anus. In those cases, the seminal fluid flows to the fundament, εἰς τὴν ἔδραν συρρεῖ ἡ τοιαύτη ἱκμάς. It is there that arousal will be felt as a desire to be scratched: "whenever desire occurs, it desires the scratching where [the fluid] was collected" (ὅταν ἡ ἐπιθυμία γένηται, τοῦτ' ἐπιθυμεῖ τῆς τρίψεως εἰς ὃ συλλέγεται). Arousal responds to a perception or a thought. Itching and rubbing are the model for erotic pleasure: it is an enjoyment that culminates in the expulsion of a fluid full of hot air, which was trapped in the body against nature⁹⁹.

Aristophanes presents us with quite a challenge. Colin Austin and S. Douglas Olson comment on this passage that the poem's "alleged erotic and titillating effects (130-3), at any rate, are due to the metre and the music rather than the words". "The effeminacy of Agathon's poetry is such", they claim, "that it has had an effect not just on Inlaw generally but on the specific portion of anatomy where sexual desire is centered (for a passive homosexual)"¹⁰⁰. But Inlaw is not a passive homosexual! He just showed off, that he is the kind of man always ready to *binein*, and the potential author of a satyr play. We expect that, listening to Agathon's song, he should register a thrust of arousal in his hyperactive phallus. For once, on the contrary, Inlaw forgets about it. I see two options: either Inlaw is mocking and mimicking Agathon, here, by posing as someone who enjoys penetration; or the binary opposition of passivity and activity

96 — *Ibid.*, 130-133. See also Davies 1982.

97 — Zeitlin 1981 & 1996: 307.

98 — Pseudo-Aristotle, *Problemata*, IV, 26.

99 — For a reconstruction of the medical, but also Platonic and Aristotelian, theory of erotic pleasure as itching and scratching, see Peponi 2002.

100 — Austin and Olson 2004: 87 and 98.

is inadequate even for him¹⁰¹. Thanks to Thomas Hubbard's close reading of comedic representations of sexuality¹⁰², we know that passivity and activity could be interchangeable roles, for the same person. This passage would confirm such a view. Not even a no-nonsense man like Inlaw, in sum, plays by the rule of bottom and top.

The duo of Inlaw and Agathon displays a magnified enactment of the social gulf between a handsome, refined and sensual man and an ordinary Athenian. In catering to his spectators Aristophanes displays how one of them would normally react¹⁰³. The play does not tell us what Aristophanes thought of Agathon, but what a regular guy, someone like Inlaw, could think about him. Their comic interaction could not offer a starker contrast with the platonic conversation between Agathon, Socrates, and his other guests. The genre calls for this contrast. Aristophanes exhibits to the Athenian people a tableau of crude binary thinking. Sex is a matter of the body. Gender performance should correspond to it, lest it creates a *taraxis tou biou*, a disturbing confusion of life, for straightforward people like Inlaw. The obvious sexual act is to insert the penis, and one does not really care into whose, or which, orifice. One is proud and boastful about his own activity; contemptuous and scornful of other men's passivity. There is no gratifying relationship. Unilateral pleasure therefore, accompanied by a most ungrateful contempt for the sexual partner, is the logic of domination. Violence is trivial. This is the realm of the earthly Aphrodite, the non-choosy one¹⁰⁴. Laid bare before Inlaw and his fellow Athenians, Agathon's homely interior looks incongruous and vulnerable. And yet, Inlaw too can feel anal titillation.

Once we have looked at the confrontation of Agathon and Inlaw, within the entire play, we can answer the question that interests us: what is Agathon's role, in Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae*?

Firstly, Agathon, a tragic poet, offers a glimpse of what comedy has to belittle and ridicule, in order to entertain its riotous audience. When the rotating contraption wheels Agathon out of view, his appearance will have been a cameo of inter-theatricality¹⁰⁵. A stage apparatus brings in a

101 — "His kinsman tells Agathon that his song is of womanish and lascivious sweetness and that it arouses in him the kind of sexual desire for which Agathon is notorious, although he himself is quite old, and the poet is for him a complete riddle" (Strauss 1966: 217).

102 — Hubbard 1998.

103 — On the theatrical situation of ancient comedy, which placed the audience in a perspective of collective irony, see Sissa 2011 and Sissa forthcoming a.

104 — Which does not mean that the aggressive partner is praised. Comedy mocks both. See Calame 1999: "Aristophanes ridicules active homosexuals as much as he does the passive variety: the politician Cleon is repeatedly accused of sodomizing his victims" (135).

105 — I am not using this word, in the meaning defined by Bratton 2003. Bratton coined the term (now associated with her name) in order to valorize the intricate connections of plays performed, beyond the distinction of text and enactment. She focused in particular on the playbills of

solemn song in honour of Apollo, as well as his author, while he is intent on improvising that song. A small backstage glides onto the larger stage: the composition of a pathetic, choral ode, infiltrates comedy. From this point of view, Agathon plays a role analogous to that of Euripides in this same play, as well as in *Acharnians*.

Secondly, Agathon sends Inlaw on his trajectory, as a champion of conformity. As an Athenian spectator from the *demos*, we said, Inlaw feels puzzled, but also provoked. What is this *taraxis tou biou*, this troubling disturbance of life? Let me fuck it! In the chronotope of comedy, to borrow Mikhail Bakhtin's language, Agathon can only be welcomed with scorn and envy; with crude phallic violence, and sheer bewilderment¹⁰⁶. He belongs to a different world. Once his luxurious interior – that house where the *Symposium* took place, in the Spring of 416 – disappears, comedy takes over. Inlaw is forced into cross-dressing, but will soon re-emerge in his unmistakable masculinity: that uncomplicated sexual aggressiveness that made him balk at Agathon in the first place. It is business as usual: body parts, bodily fluids, down-to-earth hyperrealism. And yet, as we have seen, even Inlaw's body can feel Agathon's sensuality.

Thirdly, Agathon sings a song of love, oblivious to the envy (*phthonos*) and the blame (*psogos*), of which he is the victim. He knows that envy, and he is used to that blame – he says so. But he does not give a fig. And, as an unexpected gift, he offers us one of the very first theories of fiction, of *mimesis*¹⁰⁷. Of course, he looks like a woman, he explains to poor Inlaw, but only because he is composing a female character. He will look like a man, when creating a male. He has all that is needed for *that* – don't worry, Inlaw, the anatomical piece is where it should be, not attached to the costume like yours – but when nature is not handy, then we need *mimesis*. We hunt it down.

This is a metamorphic theory of mimesis. The poet mimics whatever he is representing; the poet actually *becomes* each one of his characters. No ontology here: just the self-shaping of the poet, whose art consists in altering himself. (Inlaw, of course, volunteers for the satyr play, where his phallus could do wonders). The audience most probably laughs at Agathon. John Given has argued that Agathon responds to Inlaw's erotic reception, which is essentialist (phallic), with his highly peculiar theory of

London theaters in the Nineteenth century. Ancient theater was both metatheatrical and intertextual: this is what the word conveys for me.

106 — On popular *phthonos* towards aristocratic homosexuals, see Hubbard 1998.

107 — On the semantic field of mimesis, Else 1958 remains an extremely useful reference. Else examines the utterances of *mimos*, *mimeomai*, *mimema*, *mimesis*, in lyric poetry, tragedy and comedy. A particularly interesting passage is a fragment of Aeschylus' *Edonians*. (A. fr. 57 Nauck), quoted by Strabo, 10, 16. It is about vocal mimicry. Inlaw's bewildered questions to Agathon, about his gender are a parody of the same lost tragedy.

a temporary transition from man to woman and back to man. By his elitist isolation, Given claims, the sophisticated poet proves the Inlaw right, thus makes himself even more ridiculous¹⁰⁸. I agree that, with his theory of *mimesis*, Agathon reinforces his alienation from the erotic culture of the regular guy. But the audience probably laughed at Inlaw too. And through him, they laughed at themselves. They were, most probably, more liable to recognize themselves in that perfectly ordinary man than in an aloof intellectual¹⁰⁹.

To Inlaw' binary thinking, Agathon responds with a poetics of versatile, protean shape-shifting. Fluidity of language; fluidity of gender. Mimetic malleability of the visible body. Who cares about penetration?

The Thesmophoriazusae and the Symposium

The first lesson of this face to face between Agathon and Agathon is thus that no other Athenian man, whose portrait we have inherited, better illustrates the immense dissonance, which separated different social worlds, and different views of love. Agathon exposes the biased sociological perspective that shapes a certain vision of sexuality, based upon the dichotomy of passive and active. In Athenian erotic culture, active versus passive was precisely the obvious binary opposition, dear to the Inlaw. It is he who speaks incessantly about *peos* and *proktos*, *binein* and *bineisthai*, and, in this context, about Agathon's *pathemata*¹¹⁰. It is he who associates such obsession with an equally rough polarity: female versus male, in a plain adjustment of gender and anatomy. People like him were many, but, by no means, were they alone to think and speak about sexuality. Agathon says, sings and shows just that. Things are nuanced; bodies can be remodelled through *mimesis*; softness goes with manliness; many beautiful things, and songs, can be made through language; *eros* and *logos* are games. All this is luxury. Agathon does so, on the very stage of comic theatre, where he does not belong. He does so again, in the comfort of his home, when receiving his lover and his friends – in Plato's *Symposium*. For those who love boys and men, that *eros* deserves praise, and only praise.

108 — Given 2007.

109 — Whitehorne 2002. Whitehorne emphasizes the unfamiliarity of figures such as artists and poets, for the general public, which led vase painters and playwrights to characterize them through conventional accessories. In the theater, the *ekkuklema* itself conveyed their separation from the world of ordinary people. Socrates in the *Clouds*, Euripides in the *Acharnians*, and Agathon in the *Thesmophoriazusae* all emerge from a recondite interior, full of unusual props. All this captured "the strange and far-fetched processes involved in thinking about the world, the circumstances in which such actions took place, and the type of person who undertook something as mysterious and intangible as the creation of 'intellectual property.' Most Athenians in the audience would have had little direct experience of those processes" (34-35).

110 — Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazusae*, 200-201.

Praise can be qualified – as it is the case for Pausanias on the terrestrial, *pandemos*, Aphrodite – but we hardly find any mention of sexual “passivity”. The wise *eromenos* gratifies, *charizein*, his lover. Let us remember, one last time, Phaedrus on the manly couples of citizens and soldiers, or Aristophanes on the passionate halves who embrace each other, symmetrically. Neither anatomy nor domination ever enters the conversation.

But there is another conclusion to draw. This has to do with a question that looms large in the mind of any reader of Aristophanes and Plato: how are we to understand the presence of both, Agathon and Aristophanes, in the *Symposium*? What is Plato doing, thirty years after the production of the *Thesmophoriazusae*, by inviting the author of the play, Aristophanes, to the house of one of his own characters, Agathon himself? Unless we believe that Plato’s dialogue is just a chronicle, we can hardly avoid the suspicion that its fictional strategy might have an allusive bend¹¹¹. When read together, the play and the dialogue suggest a number of fascinating echoes. Punctual comparisons have been made, mostly to underscore the effeminacy of the poet, in both representations¹¹². I have argued, on the contrary, that Plato remodels Agathon, in a significantly revised fashion. I have already mentioned some of the points of contact and inversion. Let us now look at them systematically.

The social context is gendered: the ritual in honour of Demeter requires an exclusively female participation. The party under Dionysos’ auspices demands an exclusively male attendance. In both cases, a servant is asked to leave the place: Thratta, the slave of Inlaw in drag; the

111 — I cannot discuss here Leo Strauss’ comprehensive reading of Plato’s response to Aristophanes, focused on the representation of Socrates in the *Clouds*. Closer to our purpose, let us remember Strauss’ considerations on “Plato’s reply to Aristophanes”, in the *Symposium*. “The only Platonic dialogue in which Aristophanes occurs as a character or in which Socrates is presented as conversing with poets is devoted to *Eros*, and Socrates doctrine is shown therein to be more profoundly erotic than Aristophanes’ or any other poet’s” (Strauss 1966: 171). Strauss is commenting on the *Birds*, namely on the hymn to *Eros*. Can we read the *Symposium* also in resonance with the *Birds*?

112 — For a comparison of the two Agathons, see: Duncan 2006. For punctual rapprochements: Dover 1966; Hunter 2004. Kenneth Dover argued that, in the *Symposium*, when Aristophanes asks Erixymachos not to treat his speech as a joke, and an allusion to Agathon and Pausanias who are so manly, Plato alludes to the *Thesmophoriazusae*. “We recall the brutal portrayal of Agathon’s femininity in Th. 130 ff., cf. Ar. fr. 326, Z. Luc. p. 178 (Rabe). Here again Plato has taken a typical Aristophanic motif but has transformed it by substituting bland cattiness for vilification” (Dover 1966: 45). Because of Agathon’s mixture of *malakia* and *andreia*, and because of his role in the dialogue, I cannot agree on “bland cattiness”. Richard Hunter (Hunter 2004: 71-75) has pointed out two features, which both the comedic and the platonic Agathon have in common: the elaborate language and the aesthetic affinity between the poet and his poetry. For Hunter, Plato deliberately makes Agathon’s performance even more extravagant, and “over-the-top”, than Aristophanes did in the *Thesmophoriazusae*. Again, Plato features Agathon in a friendly and respectful manner; and has him impersonate the ideal recipient of Socrates’ *elenchos*. On the *elenchos* as compatible with civility, see Nightingale 1993 : 121-123.

flute-player, in Agathon's house¹¹³. The setting is exactly the same: in the play, through the *ekkuklema*, Agathon is shown at home, as if that were his obvious location. The philosophical drinking party takes place in that same interior. On the comic stage, raillery salutes its epiphany by the rotating machinery. In the *Symposium*, the poet's house is the normal environment of his elegant life. It is where his friends enjoy his hospitality. Whereas in the *Thesmophoriazusae*, the room where Agathon lies down is full of feminine rags, in the *Symposium*, to go to Agathon's house, even Socrates washes and dresses up. That house is a place of beauty.

In the *Thesmophoriazusae*, Agathon composes a poem right there, in real time. This piece is a hymn to a cluster of divinities: to Leto, to Artemis and, above all, to the god of poetry, Apollo. In the *Symposium*, only Agathon takes up Eryximachos' and Phaedrus' challenge, and improvises a proper *Hymn to Love* – *Eros*, the god. After all, there is another poet at the party, Aristophanes, who could do the same thing, but does not. This missed opportunity is quite striking, in light of Aristophanes' hymn to *Eros* in the *Birds*. Plato has Agathon imitate Agathon, not Aristophanes.

Comedy mocks what Agathon does with language, in the elaborate manufacture of his poetry. The poet *kamptei, torneuei, kollamelei, gnomotupei, kerochutei, gongulei, choaneuei, and antonomazei*. The *Symposium* offers a sample of that *poiesis*, in which a careful selection of interconnected words creates a pervasively parallelistic combination, rhythmic and rhymed. Aristophanes' term, *antonomazein*, describes exactly the poetic *paidia* Plato attributes to Agathon. In response, Inlaw welcomes Agathon's poetic and sartorial performance, with his penis and his anus. Firstly, after listening to the metaphors of creation, the *agroiotas* replies that he is ready to fuck the maker of those beautiful songs, together with his servant: he will funnel his *peos*, rounded and compacted, *sungongulas kai sustrepsas*, into them¹¹⁴. For him, there is only a literal, sexual meaning to metaphors. Agathon does nothing but wench, *laikazein*. Secondly, once he has heard Agathon's *Hymn to Apollo*, Inlaw announces that that feminine song, evocative of kisses and tongues, has aroused him: now he feels a tickling (*gargalos*) up his posterior (*hedra*)¹¹⁵. In contrast, Socrates and his friends salute Agathon's poetry with applause, and they lavish enthusiastic compliments on its beauty. Socrates kindly asks permission to proceed to his customary *elenchos*. From his point of view, Agathon is wrong, as we have seen, but like all of those Athenian youths, he deserves respect, tact and courtesy. The *Symposium* places a particularly emphatic focus on the

113 — Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazusae*, 293-294; *Symposium*, 176 e.

114 — Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazusae*, 52-63.

115 — Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazusae*, 130-133.

brilliant success of Agathon's improvisation, before that enlightened and elegant audience.

The two portrayals converge onto the poet's corporeal presence: Agathon is beautiful, and the aesthetic quality of an author shines in his poems. Both, poet and poem, share the same kind of body: more or less attractive, always gendered. Aristophanes' Agathon explains at length his mimetic theory of fiction: to create means to become similar to one's creation. Plato's Agathon is also beautiful. And his *logos* is beautiful. In the *Symposium*, the poet utters a speech which is in tune with himself¹¹⁶. Crucially, however, the play and the dialogue diverge about the characterization of Agathon's gender. Whereas the play amplifies Agathon's effeminacy, from the paleness and smoothness of the skin, to the voice, to the wardrobe, the dialogue never brings up the slightest allusion to anything feminine, as far as Agathon is concerned. Again, Aristophanes has Agathon himself mention his *andreia*¹¹⁷, which is compatible with his momentarily female impersonation: the poet is a *gunnis*, in other words, for Inlaw and for the Athenians. In turn, Plato lets Agathon extol *Eros*' softness, humidity, delicacy, and *andreia*¹¹⁸. Nobody disagree. No one doubts for a second that male sensuality is anything but masculine. The only mention of two genders in one body occurs in Aristophanes' speech. Heterosexual individuals are the sections of an original androgynous – and we should not think that *that* was a monster.

Beyond the *Symposium*, we can find a significant resonance between Agathon's poetics and Plato's poetics. Aristophanes' Agathon makes light of Inlaw's invidious reactions, as *phthonos*. This is a miniature theory of comedy, produced on stage. In the *Philebus*, Socrates identifies *phthonos*, precisely, as the bittersweet emotion that responds to what is laughable¹¹⁹. In the *Thesmophoriazusae*, Agathon speaks of his poetry, as metamorphosis through fashion and self-fashioning. He knows how to become similar, *homoios*, to each of the different figures he is creating:

αὐτός τε καλὸς ἦν καὶ καλῶς ἡμπέσχετο: διὰ τοῦτ' ἄρ' αὐτοῦ καὶ
καλ' ἦν τὰ δράματα. ὅμοια γὰρ ποιεῖν ἀνάγκη τῇ φύσει¹²⁰.

Read in a Platonic perspective, this is quite striking. It is not very far from what Socrates will have to say, in another Platonic conversation, the *Republic*. Socrates explains there the irresistible, enchanting power of *mimesis*: *mimesis* nourishes and, more precisely, waters the soul in its

116 — Plato, *Symposium*, 198 a-b.

117 — Plato, *Symposium*, 154-156.

118 — Plato, *Symposium*, 196 c-d.

119 — Plato, *Philebus*, 48 e 9-10.

120 — Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazusae*, 165-174.

most sensitive parts, those that are the seat of the emotions¹²¹. *Mimesis* is nothing but the poet concealing *himself*, (ἐαυτὸν ἀποκρύπτειν) and making himself similar (*homoios*) to an infinite number of characters – women, men, children, goddesses, gods – anything, female or male, that can speak. More to the point, Socrates asks: “And is not the fact of making oneself similar to someone else, in the voice or in bodily bearing, an imitation of him to whom one likens one’s self?” οὐκοῦν τό γε ὁμοιοῦν ἐαυτὸν ἄλλῳ ἢ κατὰ φωνὴν ἢ κατὰ σχῆμα μιμεῖσθαι ἐστὶν ἐκεῖνον ᾧ ἂν τις ὁμοιοῖ¹²²; *Mimesis* is enactment, performed by a certain body and in a certain voice, female or male. Homer did it intermittently; the theatre does it all the time¹²³. For Aristotle’s Agathon, as well as for Plato’s Socrates, drama is the reversible mimicry, and the (often trans-gender) metamorphosis of the Author. It is because *mimesis* functions exactly as Agathon had stated, that, in Kallipolis, the Guardians will not be allowed to indulge in it, especially not in the interpretation of female roles¹²⁴. In the *Laws*, when the Athenian explains why pederasty ought to be prohibited in Magnesia, Plato’s other ideal city, he mentions the blame incurred by a man “who tends to the impersonation of a female, (εἰς μίμησιν τοῦ θήλεος ἰόντος)”. People will reproach him with the resemblance to his model (τὴν τῆς εἰκόνης ὁμοιότητα)¹²⁵. This is exactly what Agathon does in the *Thesmophoriazusae*.

The temptation to speculate on Plato’s intentions is quite irresistible. Plato has seen, or read, the *Thesmophoriazusae*. The play shows Agathon’s poetics of *phthonos* and *mimesis*: fiction is metamorphosis and mimicry. This is why it ought to be banned from a perfect city, but this is also why Plato himself keeps composing dramatic dialogues, in which men refrain from acting like women¹²⁶. *Mimesis* acts powerfully and deceptively. *Phthonos* is how people react at pretence. Agathon is a magician of *logos*, of course, and as such – like Gorgias, Cratylus, Protagoras or Prodicus – he needs some dialectical treatment. He is a clever poet, however, who has perfectly understood what poetry is. He is an exceedingly handsome man, and a great *erotikos*, the kind of person with whom, in Athens, it is worthy

121 — Plato, *Republic*, X, 606 d.

122 — Plato, *Republic*, III, 393 c.

123 — Plato, *Republic*, III, 393 b-d. On Plato’s and Aristophanes’ Agathon’s *mimesis*, see: Pappas 1989 and 1999. “In developing his own dramas, Plato positioned himself *against* tragedians, but *alongside* the comic Aristophanes. Plato respected Aristophanes, to whom he gives a wiser speech in the *Symposium* than everyone but Socrates, and Plato’s dialogues are more reminiscent of comedy than tragedy [...]. Thus Plato may be said to construct his dialogues as philosophical modifications of Aristophanic comedies, purged of Aristophanes’ bawdy anti-intellectualism, but carrying on his verbal wit, his critique of tragedy” (Pappas 1995: 11-12).

124 — Plato, *Republic*, III, 395 d.

125 — Plato, *Laws*, VIII, 836 e.

126 — Plato, *Republic*, III, 396 c.

to start a conversation. Aristophanes has represented how ordinary people would respond to his many charms, by throwing at his face his effeminacy and his sophisticated style. This is not what he necessarily thinks about his fellow poet, since he can also mention him in a friendly manner, for instance in the *Frogs*¹²⁷. But the harm is done. For all his limits, Agathon's memory does not deserve to be left at the mercy of Inlaw, and his peers. Why not to compose a palinode? Why not to sketch a portrait that will do justice to the poet's social and sexual persona? Why not to start from his home, that cosy room revealed by the *ekkuklema*...

The *Symposium* suggests an intertextual game. A tragic poet becomes a comic character, but then ends up as a philosophical interlocutor¹²⁸. Comedy, tragedy, philosophy: this web compels us to clarify how the two poets, the tragic one and the comic one, emerge in a dialogue that ends, notoriously, with a discussion, among Socrates, Agathon and Aristophanes, about who would be the best author of comedy and tragedy¹²⁹. Socrates claims that it has to be one person. Diskin Clay has argued that only Plato can be that ideal poet, capable of excelling in both genres. He does so in his dialogues, where he actually follows the directions of his own normative poetics¹³⁰. Taking a further step in the same direction, I would add that, at the end of the talking party, Socrates is revealing to Agathon and Aristophanes what Plato has been doing with them. Plato has not only brought together, in the same dining room, the tragic and the comic playwrights; he has out-staged Aristophanes, in the *Symposium*, with the partial remake of a particular play, the *Thesmophoriazusae*. He has re-written Agathon, not as a comic character but as a successful author of tragedies. He has brought him back home.

Conclusion

This literary manoeuvre sheds light on Athenian erotic culture.

Plato's Aristophanes cannot be seen as an extension of his authorial self¹³¹. The *Symposium* offers a fictional version of his historical persona, but an adapted version. His speech is perfectly in tune with the refined atmosphere of the drinking party. Males embrace, attracted to their maleness, in each other's arms. Plato's Aristophanes does not indulge in

127 — Aristophanes, *Frogs*, 85.

128 — This interpretation expands the intertextual web surrounding the *Thesmophoriazusae*. Rossella Saetta-Cottone (2003 and 2010) has shown how Euripides' *Bacchae* (by featuring an effeminate Dionysos, and an incredulous Pentheus, who infiltrates the female rituals in drag) relate to the play, and how Aristophanes responds, in turn, with the *Frogs*.

129 — Plato, *Symposium*, 233 c-d.

130 — Clay 1975.

131 — As Paul Ludwig argues (Ludwig 2002).

allusions to anal sex, as his characters *a la* Inlaw endlessly do. Being a smart intellectual and a fitting member of this polite company – as if he knew only too well that this is not the right place, the right time, and the right audience – he abstains from that language. Plato casts him as a worldly, discerning gentleman, who knows when and where to indulge in derogatory mockery; when and where to commend *eros* as the most beautiful thing. Among *eromenoi* and *erastai*, there is no point in making fun either of Demos or of an Inlaw. This symposium is a competition of praise, not of *psogos*.

Plato's Agathon is a poet, even *the* poet – so much so that his prose morphs into verse. In the *Symposium*, Agathon composes and performs a hymn to love. For Agathon, Love is the *didaskalos* of poetry. His praise of Love, in its absolute positivity and its linguistic craftsmanship, makes him vulnerable to dialectical questioning. Plato has him exhibit the ambushes of language, indeed, but also sing a theory of love, which is both literary and sensual. In the *Thesmophoriazusae*, Agathon had composed and performed poetry; in order to justify his manners and his body, he had even explained how he did so. His chameleonic gender, with the sexual proclivity that, in Inlaw's logic, had to go with it, depended entirely upon poetry. And the Inlaw could only pour scorn on him. But from Plato's standpoint, *eros* and *mimesis* must not be despised, because the philosophical project, in Athens (not in Kallipolis), needs both.

Plato offers a theory of *eros* which is intertwined with a practice of language. In playing with words, in teasing desire, Socrates cultivates an endless and recurring conversation which, ultimately, is headed towards the truth, but, in the meantime – in the Socratic time of the dialogues – keeps him in touch with the Athenian boys, at their convenience, where they are, as they are. In that time/space, there is plenty of love: love made, desired and spoken. It is the experience of *eros* that frames the awakening of linguistic awareness and intellectual alertness. *Eros* is not merely the opening up of the will to know. It is the only experience those boys ever had. It is their only *learning* experience. The language of love is the only competence they ever acquired. Whatever they might have absorbed from good or bad teachers, they at least share that bit of useful knowledge: they know how they love. From that primordial understanding, Diotima explains in the *Symposium*, one can move on, to Beauty and the other Forms. Socrates himself says so in the *Republic*: because these boys are *erotikoi*, thus cognizant of how their desire works – from the particular to the general, from the subject to the attribute – desire is the best starting point for them to realize how language works, and how intelligence can

work¹³². In this cultural environment, if one wants to reset their education, love is the common ground where to begin.

This is why to blame *eros* between men and boys is to despise the portal to philosophy. This is why that *eros* is uniquely important, and why it deserves praise. Our outline of the speeches in the *Symposium* was intended to highlight their variations and their recurrent arguments. Phaedrus, Pausanias, Eryximachos, Aristophanes, Diotima and, more than anyone else, Agathon himself, all insist on the bond, the exchange, the harmony, the attachment, the desire of desire. All of these different voices praise two men, and one relationship. Their discourse insists on reciprocity and gratification. The two terms – lover, *erastes* and beloved, *eromenos* – can move from one partner to the other, as it is the case for Socrates, who seemed attracted to Alcibiades, but finally becomes the object of his courtship. Age cannot be exchanged, of course, but desire can. Without fail, there is a theme conspicuously missing from these panegyrics: penetration. Pricks and anuses are not a matter of interest. While Aristophanes and Eryximachos, the comic playwright and the physician, aptly discuss the corporeal and sensual reality of *eros*, neither of them cares to mention anal intercourse. In Aristophanes' myth, once a transfer of the genitals back to front allows the halves of the male/male spheres to join in coition, we said, men cling to each other, frontally. Plato's Aristophanes fails to use the language that prevails in his own plays.

The irrelevance of penetration brings about another major requirement of a praise of love: the impossibility of theorizing erotic relationships as a form of domination. Phaedrus and Pausanias go out of their way to emphasize mutual interest and reciprocity, beyond age difference. But it is Agathon who mostly insists on the delicate nature of love. *Eros*, Agathon claims, lives in the soul. And, incredibly: *Eros* is soft, he is the softest thing. He flees hardness¹³³. *Eros* hates violence (*bia*), and only wishes agreement, willingness on both sides¹³⁴.

In this purely male company, the most devoted advocate of Love, Agathon, pushes the excellence of the god to its extreme, and somehow paradoxical, consequences. There is nothing exacting, hard-hitting, and intrusive about it. There is nothing phallic. And yet, *malakia* is compatible with *andreia*¹³⁵. Softness goes together with manliness. This is absolutely crucial. The insinuating power of desire and pleasure, in other

132 — Plato, *Republic* V, 474 a-475 b. Socrates takes the argument from love, to wine, to honor and finally to wisdom.

133 — Plato, *Symposium*, 196 a.

134 — Plato, *Symposium*, 196 b-c.

135 — Plato, *Symposium*, 195 e (*malakia*) and 197 c-d (*andreia*).

words the sensuality of love, succeeds in creating pleasure and desire in others. But this has nothing to do with effeminacy. It is just virility at its best. It is maleness as it should be, in polite company and among civilized people. No one is a she-male, a *gunnis* – not in the least Agathon himself. Agathon is not only *at home* in this environment: he is the master of the house, and, so to speak, of its language. He is the finest theorist of urban love.

So how far apart are, ultimately, Agathon and Agathon?

Well, less than what Inlaw might think.

The *Thesmophoriazusae* show an effeminate man, passive and liable to penetration, in the eyes of the beholder: the ordinary Athenians who can easily identify with good old Inlaw. They expect that: in comedy, it happens all the time. Agathon responds by saying that he is an *aner*, and with his theory of gender as *mimesis*, widening the gap between them and himself.

The *Symposium* shows the poet Aristophanes in his social environment, the elite. Among his friends, he praises *eros* in its most reciprocal and manly version: they expect that. Being Agathon's guest, Aristophanes is not going to offend his host with a piece of nasty *psogos* about effeminacy. This is not what he thinks, anyway: it was just to amuse the Athenians, at their own expenses.

And what about Agathon? The *Symposium* shows him in his best light: successful, euphoric and more creative than ever. He is the perfect linguistic player, a designated victim for Socrates' *elenchos*. Let them laugh invidiously (and Socrates did argue that comic laughter was, essentially, malicious, envious pleasure: *phthonos*). But let me, Plato, remake a portrait of Agathon, far from the mad crowd, as the mimetic poet, at home, in a merry company.

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