

Book X of Athenaeus' *Deipnosophistae* preserves two passages from tragedy in which an illiterate herdsman describes the inscribed name "Theseus" (454b-d). The first is from Euripides' *Theseus* (Nauck *TGF* fr. 382) and the second from Agathon's *Telephus* (Snell *TGF* fr. 4); both plays remain understudied (although see Rosen 1999; Slater 2002), but I argue that there is a rich intertextual relationship between the two ekphrastic excerpts which invites exploration. This paper addresses the implications of Agathon's imitation of Euripides, and situates these passages within the politics of Attic literacy in the latter half of the 5th century.

Athenaeus records the lines from Euripides' *Theseus* that communicate the letters in Theseus' name, Θ-H-Σ-E-Y-Σ, and then cites Agathon's imitation of this passage in his *Telephus*. Like Euripides, Agathon has an illiterate character describe the letters in Theseus' name in terms of their individually carved epigraphical strokes. Unlike Euripides, however, Agathon explicitly connects these letter-shapes to tangible material objects: the *theta* is described as a circle with an *omphalos* in the center, which suggests the boss in the center of a shield (e.g. *Iliad* 13.192), or the stone marking the middle of the earth at Delphi (e.g. *Pythian* 4.74). So, too, the *sigma* is like a "Scythian bow" (*Skythikos toxos*) and the *epsilon* is a "trident lying sideways" (*trioudous plagios*). These material referents hint at Theseus' own story, evoking the sculpted representation of his heroic feats on the Treasury of the Athenians at Delphi, or his father Poseidon. Thus Agathon's ekphrastic description of the letters in Theseus' name cleverly caps Euripides' description by obliquely referring to Theseus' heroic deeds and divine parentage. And Agathon manages all this in 6 lines compared to Euripides' 12.

Agathon further deviates from Euripides' model in his terminology: while Euripides twice uses the term *grammai* for letters, Agathon substitutes forms of the word *kanōn*. *Kanōn* has a particularly marked association with the world of craftsmanship, denoting, for example, a straight rod used to facilitate weaving, masonry, or carpentry. I suggest that the word may have elicited an association with the famous sculptor Polykeitos' recently composed treatise "Canon" (e.g. Pliny *NH* 34.55-66; Stewart 1990: 160-63; Pollitt 1994: 19-24). Indeed, the *symmetria* prescribed in the sculptor's treatise accords with the structural *symmetria* of Agathon's passage: 6 lines describe 6 letters.

Finally, this paper considers the political implications of these passages. The ability to communicate Theseus' inscribed name successfully is critically important since it was a key point of recognition in the tragedy. By staging this exchange, I suggest, Euripides and Agathon reflect and simultaneously help resolve a tension increasingly felt after the 460s by the democratic citizenry in Athens (Thomas 1992: 130-39), whose dominant political ideology was *isonomia*. In a city where public inscriptions protecting and confirming Athenian civic values littered the landscape, and where written law had become explicitly associated with Athenian justice and democracy (e.g. *Suppliants* 433), the ability to read and write took on new political significance: the democratic process is unbalanced, unfair, and thus utterly ineffective if all citizens cannot read, and the illusion of political parity shatters. These tragic performances, then, address and allay the fear within the democratic audience – many of whom undoubtedly could not read – of political alienation. In these plays physical gesture and vivid speech ultimately facilitate communication about Theseus, himself a metonymic representation of Athens' greatness, and the whole audience is able to understand the important messages of the polis equally.

As I contend, the innovative mode of "reading" undertaken by these illiterate herdsmen affords us new ways of reading not only Euripides and Agathon as poets, but the larger cultural and political milieu of which they are a part.