

How to hum?

A case of ancient Greek

Marcel Lysgaard Lech

Translating comedy and humour in any language is difficult. Translating ancient Greek comedy is exceedingly difficult since so much humour depends on the cultural context of the language, and ancient Greek jokes are, well, very ancient. Some are without context (another humour-killer), some far beyond our decorum, some completely incomprehensible, and sometimes we simply understand something as a joke, whereas the Greeks did not, while we miss other jokes that the Greek audience would have laughed at.

Having translated ancient philosophical prose of Plato and Aristotle and tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides from ancient Greek into Danish, for me the comic playwright Aristophanes still claimed the prize for being the most difficult to translate, because of the need to make the text just remotely humorous. It took a good two years to achieve a (hopefully) readable translation of the comedy, *Hippes* (commonly translated as *Knights*), which at times is funny, but at other times, the jokes need a commentary in order to explain the punch line – no better way to kill laughter. The translation

is intended for reading, not for being acted on stage. In order to achieve this, it would need a thorough rewrite.



*Cover of Aristophanes' Rytteriet
(Ida Balslev / Hans Reitzel Publishers)*

Onomatopoetic words

The play is an allegory on the Athenian democracy, where politicians are depicted as slaves and Democracy as

the grumpy old master. Despite all the jokes, strange metaphors etc., one verse (Greek drama is mix of recited verses and songs) demanded extra attention. In the beginning of the play, two slaves discuss how awful their situation has become since their master bought a new slave, a real scoundrel (he is a new demagogue rising). They then begin to hum a “classic” tune by someone called Olympus, who is apparently Greek music’s grand old man. They explicitly refer to their humming as wailing together, as though they were playing the *aulos* (*auloi* in plural), a double wooden instrument like an oboe, which apparently had a distinct humming, or buzzing sound, like wasps.



Pericles’ Funeral Oration (1852): A classic depiction of the ideal Athenian democracy, the target for Aristophanes’ satire

In Greek, the hum follows the common iambic trimeter: *my my my my my my my my my my my*, but it is of course impossible to recreate the melody and the intonation of the hum. Perhaps the Greeks hummed like in the song by Crash Test Dummies *Mmm Mmm Mmm*, but since the Greeks needed vowels in order to create the rhythm of the verse, Aristophanes inserts the y-sound as a kind of onomatopoetic

glue. However, Greek onomatopoetic words often end with a x-sound, e.g. farts are “pappax”, the croaking of frogs are “brekekekex koax koax” etc., so it seems Aristophanes intended something more than the mere “mmm”-sound.

Translating a hum

So how do we translate the hum that Aristophanes perhaps expected (some of) his audience to recognise as Olympus’ tune for *auloi* (which probably also had lyrics)? The slaves, however, didn’t know or didn’t remember the lyrics and the tune, and the reason for mentioning Olympus is probably because the audience didn’t remember them either: They knew the musical tradition rather than the specific song Aristophanes had in mind.

The common British/American translations recognise the difficulty, but do nothing to solve the problem, rendering the *my my*’s with “Boo hoo”’s, “Hoo hoo”’s, “whoa whoa”’s etc., clearly focusing on the wailing of the tune, and the “*my my*” might simply sound funny and not like wailing at all (the Greeks prefer “*oimoi, aiai*” and the like, when they describe crying and wailing). If I were translating directly for the stage, I would have done something similar and left the exact humming to the director and the actors, but since my translation was mainly for readers, the humming had to make some sense, without being just an onomatopoetic rendering. But there is more to the humming. Athenian slaves were mainly imported from the Persian empire, the part that is modern day Turkey, a region that the Greeks thought very exotic; however, there was a long musical tradition from these regions that the Athenian elite enjoyed. Olympus was



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Photo: Morten Holtum (mortenholtum.dk)

part of this exotic musical tradition, and thus Aristophanes satirically depicts non-elite (slaves) humming like Athenian members of the elite.

The slaves are actually an allegory for the Athenian elite, and thus their taste for old and exotic music (Olympus was from Phrygia) is part of their elitist education, while the slaves as characters were supposed to be from more eastern (exotic) regions.

Modern allusions & meta-commentary

What I did was to copy the humming of the Danish comedian [Frederik Cilius](#), who stars in a daily satirical radio show in character as the female journalist Kirsten Birgit. Among her many virtues as an elitist, snobbish, cultural conservative, she hums a lot, from children songs to Wagner, mainly to these “sounds”: skab, skib, skub, dab, dib, dub. As a result, I translated the verse like this “Dab dab skib skub skab skub skib skab skib skub skab skab”. This is of course complete gibberish for the uninitiated, (just like the *my mýs* for those who did not recognise the tune or were not familiar with

the tradition). But for those who are acquainted with the extremely popular radio show, the translated verse should make them recollect one of Kirsten Birgit’s deliberately annoying hums and hopefully make it possible for the reader to reconstruct any such tune by reading the verse. Furthermore, it captured an idea of cultural eclecticism, knowing Kirsten Birgit/knowing Olympus and recognising both’s elitism.

Thus, instead of being just a wailing or a hum, I hope I have captured more of the cultural meaning of the hum. And just as Aristophanes meta-poetically refers to the tradition of Olympus’ music, I translated the verse as a meta-commentary on the history of satire from Aristophanes to modern Danish satire, which after years of non-dangerous, non-political comedy, has regained its full satirical potential (like Aristophanic comedy) and generated a great deal of polemics and discussion in the media. This, of course, is far beyond Aristophanes, but I am quite sure that he would have condoned with a jolly smile.