

## Why We Shouldn't Use the F Word: Two Case Studies in What it Means that the *aulos/tibia* is Not a Flute

Although some controversies remain, the basic nature of the *aulos/tibia* has been firmly established: it is a pair of pipes, each with a double reed, played simultaneously (e.g., West, Hagel). Nevertheless, many classicists continue to call the instrument a flute; and there appears to be a widespread sense that those who insist the instrument not be called a flute are merely pedantic. This paper examines two passages in which translation of *aulos/tibia* as “flute” is especially misleading. The passages show clearly how important accurate organological nomenclature is, how much knowledge of the *aulos/tibia* can enlighten us about otherwise mysterious passages, and how close analysis of texts can reveal more about the *aulos/tibia* and its effects.

Late in Aristophanes' *Acharnians*, a Theban enters, hoping to take advantage of Dikaiopolis' private peace to do some trading. He is accompanied by two or more *aulos* players (860-9). The instruments played here are obviously not flutes: they buzz like wasps (σφήκες) and bees (βομβάλλιοι). “Buzzing” describes well the sound of reed instruments like the *aulos/tibia* and many of its modern relatives. The instruments are loud: the Theban says that their sound was forcing to the ground the petals of the flowers he was carrying. And they are obnoxious, even to the Theban whom they accompany on stage (Thebans were known for their excessive love of the *aulos*). The meter used here, iambic trimeter, is almost never accompanied by the *aulos* in Greek drama: the actors are not singing or chanting with the instrumentalists but trying to out shout them. The double pipes of one *aulos* would already have produced dissonance: even for a Theban the dissonance produced by several pipes played together would have sounded cacophonous (cf. Moore).

A fragment of Ennius (*inc.* 7 Vahlen) suggests a very different but equally un-flutelike sound from a *tibia*: “*tibicina maximo labore mugit.*” This is the earliest use of *mugio* in Latin literature, but later occurrences reveal that besides its usual use of the mooing of cattle, the word could be used of lions, storms, murder victims, and others making sounds low in pitch and loud

(*TLL*). Here a female *tibia* player is playing an especially long *tibia*. Visual and literary evidence suggests that producing the necessary air pressure to play such *tibiae* was challenging (Fleischhauer): hence *maximo labore*. Courtney is almost certainly right in suggesting that the fragment comes from Ennius' *Sota*. In this comico-satirical work, Ennius has produced a topsy-turvy scene in which a *tibicina*, who would normally play a small *tibia* with relatively little effort, is forced to make a sound on an exceptionally large instrument. Given the frequency with which both Sotadaeans and *tibicinae* are associated with sex (Bettini, Moretti), an obscene double-entendre is likely here.

These are two passages among many that make sense only when we keep in mind the most un-flutelike characteristics of the *aulos/tibia*.

#### Works Cited

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