

ANDERSEN'S CODE: ARISTOPHANIC OBSCENITY IN *THUMBELINA*¹

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Summary: In his seemingly innocent fairy tale *Thumbelina*, Hans Christian Andersen makes two allusions to Aristophanes. One of them is quite explicit, as the author makes a toad produce the sound *co-ax, co-ax, brek-ek-ek-kex*, which is a quotation from the *Frogs*. The other allusion is less conspicuous. In one of the first sentences of *Thumbelina*, an object that a woman needs in order to beget a child is referred to as a barleycorn. As I argue, even though on the surface it can be explained in terms of magic typical for fairy tales, it can be also understood as an obscene allusion to the sexual act. This results from the ambiguity, well-known in Andersen's time, of the word κριθή, which in Aristophanes' comedies can mean either barleycorn or penis.

Hans Christian Andersen is an author of some of the most widely read stories for children. He introduced (if not necessarily invented from scratch) a few characters that, in spite of almost two centuries having elapsed, still remain iconic and strongly influence popular culture. *Thumbelina* is certainly among his most famous creations, which is typically thought of (if we allow for some gender stereotypes that may seem embarrassingly old-fashioned, but at the same time seem to correspond

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to Andersen's own ideas) as a fairy tale for girls in what may be called a pink princess phase. However, as often happens with stories for children, Andersen's tale seems to transmit other layers of meanings, some of which are not meant to be understood by their primary audience.

All the adventures of Thumbelina result from her beauty, which attracts males, who either try to seduce her or abduct her in order to pursue their intention of marriage. Needless to say, other kinds of fulfilment of male passion for a beautiful and helpless female are not explicitly mentioned anywhere, even though the text seems to be bursting with suppressed sexuality. It also underlies the first instance of Thumbelina's abduction, which is, quite unusually, performed by a woman for her son's sake:

One night as she lay in her cradle, a horrible toad hopped in through the window – one of the panes was broken. This big, ugly, slimy toad jumped right down on the table where Thumbelina was asleep under the red rose petal. “Here's a perfect wife for my son!” the toad exclaimed. She seized upon the walnut shell in which Thumbelina lay asleep, and hopped off with it, out the window and into the garden. A big broad stream ran through it, with a muddy marsh along its banks, and here the toad lived with her son. Ugh! he was just like his mother, slimy and horrible. “Co-ax, co-ax, brek-ek-eke-kex”, was all that he could say when he saw the graceful little girl in the walnut shell.²

While the female toad can speak, her son is only able to produce a sound similar to that of amphibians in mating season, which may be evocative not only of his stupidity but also of arousal. More strikingly, however, in this passage Andersen makes an allusion to a learned tradition, as the seemingly nonsensical *co-ax, co-ax, brek-ek-eke-kex* is (with a slight change) what Aristophanes made his chorus of frogs sing in a swamp (*Ra*.

2 All passages from Andersen are given in the translation by Jean Hersholt available on The Hans Christian Andersen Centre website (https://andersen.sdu.dk/vaerk/hersholt/Thumbelina_e.html); consulted on 24.09.2020).

209, *sqq.*).³ This suggests that the author was familiar with Aristophanes and that he did not intend to conceal this.

This outward allusion to Attic comedy may be taken as an incentive to look for some other instances of intertextuality, even though this may seem to be a rather bold strategy for an author of fairy tales. After all, Aristophanes had a racy reputation as a poet that is certainly not suitable for children. However, once Andersen puts away his innocent mask, the whole text becomes much juicier than it might have seemed. It begins thus:

There once was a woman who wanted so very much to have a tiny little child, but she did not know where to find one. So she went to an old witch, and she said: "I have set my heart upon having a tiny little child. Please could you tell me where I can find one?" "Why, that's easily done", said the witch. "Here's a grain of barley for you, but it isn't at all the sort of barley that farmers grow in their fields or that the chickens get to eat. Put it in a flower pot and you'll see what you shall see." "Oh thank you!" the woman said. She gave the witch twelve pennies, and planted the barley seed as soon as she got home. It quickly grew into a fine large flower, which looked very much like a tulip. But the petals were folded tight, as though it were still a bud. "This is such a pretty flower", said the woman. She kissed its lovely red and yellow petals, and just as she kissed it the flower gave a loud *pop!* and flew open. It was a tulip, right enough, but on the green cushion in the middle of it sat a tiny girl. She was dainty and fair to see, but she was no taller than your thumb. So she was called Thumbelina.

Already the first sentence presupposes sexuality, given that an average adult person in the time of Andersen did not need to consult an old witch in order to find a solution to the initial problem of Thumbelina's mother-to-be. The answer to the question of what a woman may need in order to beget a child seems all too obvious, or at least, it might have seemed that

3 This connection between Aristophanes and Andersen has been observed, among others, by Hall 2007: 29 n. 71, but, as far as I can tell, no compelling interpretation has been offered in the scholarly literature.

way in the period before artificial insemination was invented. And indeed, what happens in the initial part of the story to a large degree satisfies our expectations, as one does not have to swear by Freud to notice that the description of the flower and its treatment is strongly charged with eroticism and that the plant itself has phallic connotations. The only element that seems to be odd in this puzzle is the immediate response given by the witch, as the barley seed that the witch gives to the woman does not, at first glance, seem like what an adult would expect in this context. This is where we return to Aristophanes.

In *Peace*, Trygaeus, the main character, who is just about to perform a sacrifice of a sheep, instructs his servant to distribute barley grains among the spectators. Within the comic convention, this was meant to allow the audience to take part in the fictional ritual, as pelting an animal with grain was one of preliminary rites, which, among other functions, helped to distinguish the members of the sacrificing community from potential outsiders.⁴

Once the barley is distributed, Trygaeus asks (963-67):

Τρυγαῖος	ἔδωκας ἤδη;	
Οἰκέτης β'		νή τὸν Ἑρμῆν, ὥστε γε
	τούτων ὅσοιπὲρ εἰσι τῶν θεωμένων	
	οὔκ ἐστὶν οὐδεὶς ὅστις οὐ κριθὴν ἔχει.	
Τρυγαῖος	οὐχ αἱ γυναῖκές γ' ἔλαβον.	
Οἰκέτης β'		ἀλλ' εἰς ἐσπέραν
	δώσουσιν αὐταῖς ἄνδρες.	

Trygaeus: You've given it to them already?

Slave: By Hermes,⁵ I have, so that of all these spectators there isn't one who hasn't got some seed.

Trygaeus: The women haven't got any.

4 On the ritual use of barley grains, see von Fritze 1897; Stengel 1910: 13-33; Ziehen 1902 and more recently 1966: 107-8; van Straten 1995: 31-40; Graf 2002: 121; Paul 2018; Bednarek 2019.

5 It hardly seems to be a coincidence that in this context the slave invokes Hermes, an ithyphallic divinity.

Slave: Well, the men will give it to them tonight!⁶

The wordplay that Alan Sommerstein struggled to reflect in his translation (note the use of the word *seed*) results from the double meaning of the word κριθή, which usually refers to a *grain of barley*, but in comedy it is sometimes used, as it is here, to cover also the semantic field of *membrum virile*.⁷ This usage is explained in the scholia (R 607a), in Suda (κ 2416) and Hesychius (κ 4101). Based on these texts, Brunck added an explicatory note to his edition of Aristophanes' comedies from 1783, which soon became the standard point of reference. He wrote (*ad* 965): κριθή enim, ut ἐρέβινθος, virile membrum notat etc.

In the same (third) volume of Aristophanes' comedies, Brunck added a supplementary note on Aristophanes' *Birds* 565.⁸ In it he suggested that in this line, transmitted as ἦν Ἀφροδίτῃ θύῃ, πυρούς ὄρνιθι φαληρίδι θύειν (*when someone sacrifices to Aphrodite, [he is supposed to] sacrifice some wheat to the coot*), the πυρούς (*wheat*) should be corrected into κριθάς. Otherwise, unless corrected, the reference to the wheat seems to fit oddly in the context (for the reasons that are hardly relevant here). The word κριθή, on the other hand, as Brunck argued, was particularly adequate in the context of the mock sacrifices to Aphrodite, due to its obscene connotations. This conjecture has become widely accepted.⁹ It was also incorporated into Brunck's editions published after his death. For example, the Oxford edition of Aristophanes' comedies from 1810 features the corrected version of the text as well as the explicatory note on the double meaning of the word κριθή.¹⁰

Although I do not know whether Andersen had direct access to any of these editions, it is quite clear that the obscene connotations of the word

6 Text and translation by Sommerstein 1985.

7 For the discussion of the obscene use of the word κριθή, see especially Henderson 1991: 119-20.

8 Brunck 1783: 212. The text of the *Birds* was printed in the second volume of the same Brunck's edition with no corrections of the paradosis and no references in endnotes. The conjecture was therefore clearly a result of his work on the text of the *Peace*.

9 Thus, Dunbar 1995: *ad loc.*; Sommerstein 1987: *ad. loc.*

10 Andersen could have been also familiar with Becker's commentary on the *Peace*, in which commentary (1829: *ad* 967) the obscene meaning of κριθή is explained.

κριθή were already a commonplace among those who studied Aristophanes when Andersen published his *Thumbelina* in 1835. It was also well known when Andersen studied Greek literature as a pupil of Simon Meisling in the 1820s.¹¹ Therefore, it seems very likely that he knew that the word, which in the Greek refers to a barleycorn could be taken to mean penis. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that a barleycorn is exactly what the witch in the *Thumbelina* prescribes to the woman, who seems to be single and old enough to have a child, but so childish that she does not know where babies come from. The answer is encoded in the double meaning of the word κριθή. It seems too precise to be a matter of coincidence. It rather seems to be a joke, which Andersen made over the heads of the children, who were unable to grasp the allusion. Only those who knew Aristophanes' comedies and his exegetic tradition could fully appreciate it.

There is also a smoking gun, which Andersen does not even try to conceal. As if in order to make sure that we know that he knew what he was doing, Andersen left an evident trace of his familiarity with the learned tradition, by using the onomatopoeia *co-ax, co-ax, brek-ek-ek-kex*. Thus, we and some of his educated readers back in the 1830s should feel invited to appreciate the wisdom of the old witch, Andersen's wit and the naiveté of whole generations of adults who made their children read the *Thumbelina* as if it were an innocent fairy tale.

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11 According to his biographers (e.g. Andersen 2005: 52-77), Andersen's relationship with his teacher was very difficult and there are reasons to think that the figure of the toad was inspired by Meisling (Larsson 2008: 110-12). Unfortunately, I am not aware of any direct evidence that indicates that Meisling explained (or was able to explain) to his pupil the double entendre in *Peace* 693-7 or in *Birds* 565.

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