

The Greeks had a blue word for it

THE ancient Greeks, as every school boy and girl knows -- or at least once knew -- invented democracy, comedy, tragedy and philosophy.

Even today many of our markers of cultivation -- words such as academy, school, history, logic, grammar, poetry, rhythm, harmony, melody and music -- can be traced to the Attic dialect of Athens.

But not all gifts passed down from our esteemed ancestors are gilt, for the Athenian citizenry also made an art form of what we now call smut, dirt, or soft porn. It's not only that phalluses adorned the streets and the surfaces of their famed black figure vases, the language of that unique Athenian contribution to Western civilisation -- the theatre -- was downright rude.

In the past century the most authoritative translations from the classical tradition, preserved between the green (Greek) and red (Latin) covers of Harvard's Loeb Classical Library, danced rather prissily around this fact. No longer. The Loeb library is rolling out a series of new translations and they shed a direct light on our literary inheritance.

Aristophanes, the master of Old Attic Comedy, is especially unbridled. In his *Women at the Thesmophoria*, for example, two characters are discussing the tragic poet Agathon, whose effeminate looks were as legendary as his homosexuality.

The conversation runs as follows:

Euripides: There is Agathon.

Kinsman: You don't mean the suntanned strong one?

Euripides: No, a different one. You've never seen him?

Kinsman: Not the one with the full beard?

Euripides: You've never seen him.

Kinsman: Absolutely not, as far as I know.

Euripides: Well, you must have f.ked him, though you might not know it.

This replaces an earlier translation in which the final line, somewhat inexplicably, read: "I fear there's much you don't remember, sir."

A little later in the play Agathon, who is wearing a woman's cloak, counsels his audience of the need to confront misfortune with submission. It's a bit of a free kick for Euripides' ribald kinsman. He shoots back: "You certainly got your wide arsehole, you faggot, not with words but in a spirit of submission."

In another play by Aristophanes, the oft-staged anti-war comedy *Lysistrata*, the women of Athens refer to themselves as a frail sex, but in the new dirty realist translation they become a "low and horny race".

Something of the classical world's dual inheritance -- the noble and the vulgar; elevated and base; beautiful and

ugly -- is caught by Frederick Nietzsche's famous distinction between the sublime Apolline spirit and its scary alter ego: the Dionysiac. In a sense, all Greek drama has its roots in the Dionysiac impulse, and was performed at festivals of the wine god Dionysos, called Dionysia. But where tragedy aspires to the sublime, only comedy -- an ancient genre believed to have begun with rustic phallic songs -- retains its attachment to communal intoxication and merriment: hallmarks of the Dionysiac.

The Loeb editors, for at least a century, have attempted to draw a veil across the edgy Dionysos. The previous translation of Aristophanes, first published in 1924, has only just been replaced by a five-volume series edited afresh by Boston University classicist Jeffrey Henderson. It was at least a decade in the making.

"This is a particular kind of comedy that was meant to be transgressive," explains Henderson, who is also general editor of the Loeb Classical Library. "The characters wore outrageous costumes and had big leather phalluses. The point of the comedy was to shake people up. To expose what was normally hidden, to make fun of it, to take the important people down a peg or two and speak up for the ordinary man."

Harvard University Press felt the uncut Aristophanes was justified in order to meet advances in scholarship and a more liberal attitude to sexually explicit banter. As Henderson points out in his introduction to the new series, the old Aristophanes was "as Aristophanic as the Victorian era would allow". Which is to say, not very.

"The original Loeb contract, dating from 1911, enjoined authors to alter or omit anything that might give offence," remarks Ian Stevenson, assistant editor at HUP.

"This injunction, which had as much to do with respect for the law as with prudishness, was removed in the late 1960s, as soon as the British and US obscenity laws were finally relaxed enough to allow the straightforward translation of racy authors; the first to benefit were Martial and Petronius, and since then the library has added, revised, or replaced others, such as

Aristophanes, the Greek iambic poets and mime-writers, Catullus, Horace, Juvenal and Perseus, Plautus (in progress), and Terence. During this time Loeb policy has been to produce faithful translations: the nearest attainable Anglophone equivalent to the Greek or Latin without any filters."

In the original Loeb, obscene or explicitly sexual passages were often omitted, or sometimes translated into Latin. In the passage quoted above from Aristophanes' *Thesmophoria*, for example, the real meaning of that pungent last line of Greek was encoded in a Latin footnote (for the delectation of classicists).

Some other passages were subtly altered.

In the old translation of Aristophanes' *Acharnians* the unlikely hero, Dicaeopolis, is first to arrive at the Athenian assembly. "I pass the time complaining, yawning, stretching," he says in the old translation. And the new: "I sigh, I yawn, I stretch, I fart."

A little later in the play we have a phallic hymn and procession which seems to capture the untamed Dionysiac spirit of archaic comedy: "Yes, it's far more pleasant, Phales Phales (the personification of the phallus), to catch a budding maid with pilfered wood -- Strymodorus Thracian girl from the Rocky Bottom -- and grab her waist, lift her up, throw her down, and take her cherry."

The old Loeb version was considerably more coy: "Far happier 'tis to me and sweeter, O Phales, Phales, some soft glade in, to woo the saucy, arch, deceiving, young maiden, as from my woodland fells I meet her descending with my fagots laden, and catch her up, and ill entreat her, and make her pay the fine for thieving."

Stevenson offers this example from the Roman poet Martial. "You sang badly, Aegle, while your practices were normal. Now you sing well, but you aren't to be kissed," ran the old version. This has been rendered anew as: "You sang badly, Aegle, in the days when you were f.ked. Now you sing well, but you aren't to be kissed."

Alastair Blanshard, a University of Sydney classicist with an interest in ancient erotica, notes that in the old Loeb of Greek writer Achilles Tatius' *Leucippe and Cleitophon*, as soon as the discussion of the supremacy of same-sex love over different-sex love moves on from mythological arguments to "the pleasure that lies in the works of love themselves", the translation switches from English to Latin. A close encounter with the full-blooded reality of classical language can surprise even students raised on the argot of the inter-

net. "I recall one student practically turning pink in his face upon his first encounter with the new Aristophanes translation," says Blanshard's university colleague Julia Kindt, a German-trained classicist and expert in Greek religion. "The Loeb editions, both the old and the new translations, ultimately also show how we read ourselves into the texts when we translate. The different styles superbly reflect the cultural predispositions of the time when they

were produced."

For scholars of earlier times a classical education was part of a broader project: cultivation and elite formation. The great German scholar Theodor Mommsen, born in 1817, hoped an education in the classics would "prepare the child of the cultivated classes to be a professor of classical studies". And for several centuries after the physical rediscovery of the classical world at Rome, the Vesuvian cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum, Apollo's sanctuary of Delphi, and Athens itself, these Apollonian ideals stressing rationality, mastery and proportion held sway.

But the late-modern classical revival is widening our aperture on the past and enlarging the term "classical" to include things that might once have seemed barbaric.

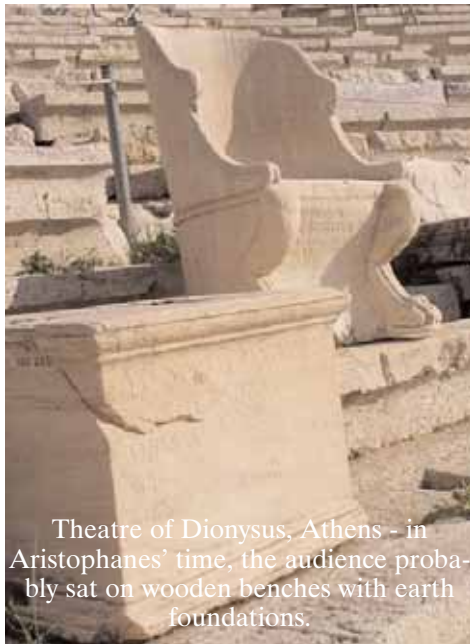
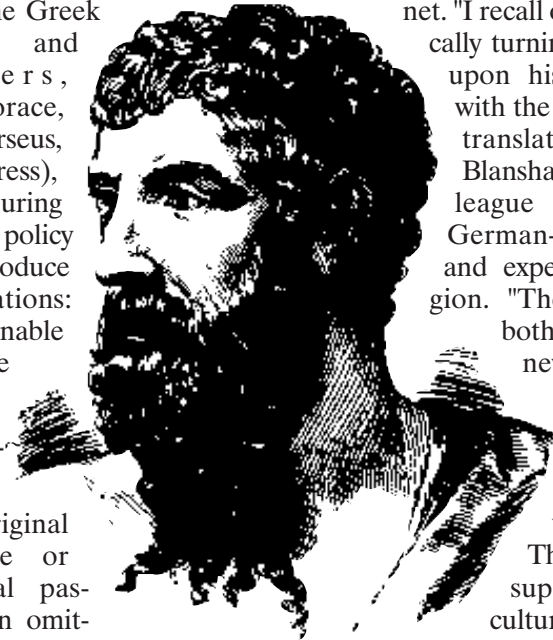
We can now detect, using Nietzsche's terminology, a refocusing of interest in the classical world around the Dionysiac elements of that tradition. Certainly, the makers of the US miniseries *Rome* pictured the ancient capital in the colours of a latter day Mumbai: as festive, unruly, blood-stained, and aglow. Contemporary scholars, who are more interested in transgression than connoisseurship, are finding a different use for the classics. The new-look Loeb editions are meeting this challenge, and bringing the classical world home.

The only trouble with Aristophanes is that it's not entirely clear in which camp he seems more comfortable: the Apollonian or the Dionysiac? His plays are crammed with fart, phallus and bum jokes, and scorn is his metier, while his theatrical language is a blend of the lofty and the vulgar.

But Aristophanic subversion had a rational end, as social critique essential for healthy democratic functioning. Dicaeopolis, it's worth remembering, the main character of *Acharnians*, will "speak against everyone" as he makes his lone case to the Athenians for a private truce with Sparta. But he will speak, nevertheless, the outrageous truth.

As he tells the assembly, in words that transcend the fog of translation: "Even comedy knows about what's right; and what I say will be shocking, but right."

Article from The Australia



Theatre of Dionysus, Athens - in Aristophanes' time, the audience probably sat on wooden benches with earth foundations.