

WHISTLING IN ANTIQUITY

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Plocamus, one of the guests at Trimalchio's dinner-party, when encouraged by his host to give proof of his histrionic and musical talents, is only too keen to oblige: *oppositaque ad os manu nescio quid taetrum exsibilavit quod postea Graecum esse affirmabat* ("and he put his hand to his mouth and whistled out some terrible stuff I couldn't identify. Afterwards he told us it was a Greek air"; transl. Lindsay 1960). If we were to pose ourselves the question whether antiquity knew the phenomenon of people whistling tunes, this episode from Petronius' *Satyricon* (64.5) seems to provide us with an affirmative answer. Unfortunately, however, though most translators take *exsibilavit* here to mean "whistled", it is also possible that the verb is used by Petronius in a metaphorical sense, as it is by others (Seneca *De Ira* 3.4), to describe a squeaky voice. And this possibility dashes our hope of ever finding an answer to the question whether Greeks and Romans did whistle tunes, because this episode in Petronius is the only one that seemed to hold a promise of providing us with a positive answer. It must be added, though, that such an answer would here in any case not be satisfying. Plocamus would have been doing what Hesychius calls ἀλωλάζειν: τό συρίττειν διὰ τῶν δακτύλων ("whistling through the fingers") i.e. imitating the sound of a flute (ἀλόος) while using one's fingers as a substitute for an instrument. This is a different way of whistling from that which one practices purely with the lips, which is the kind of whistling in which we are interested here.

In antiquity the melody of vocal music was much more subordinated to the lyrics, and had much less of an independent life, than is the case in modern music (Sendrey 1974:408). Furthermore, all parts of the composition – words, rhythm, melody – were less fixed and more dependent on the *hic et nunc* than nowadays. Of necessity, however, they always preserved a certain conformity which guaranteed their character in spite of variations and improvisations (Comotti 1989:7). People were therefore capable, just as today, of recognizing melodies, and Cicero discovered – to his amazement – that there were music boffins who could, on hearing the first tunes of a piece played by an auletes, immediately name the play to which it belonged (*Acad.* 2.20).

Both Greek and Roman societies knew a great variety of songs: for drinking, for tilling the land, for processions and festivals, lullabies, love songs, drinking songs, soldier songs, songs for anniversaries etc. (Sendrey 1974:209-305, 407-408; Wille 1967:126-152). Most people must therefore have been familiar with a large number of melodies from vocal music. Melodies without words were also constantly played by soloists like shepherds on their flutes and pan-pipes, and by the tibia-players who adorned banquets – or spoiled them, in Martial's opinion (9.77). Would nobody then have ever whistled, or hummed, a tune that he had recently heard or that he could not get out of his head? It is hard to believe that this never happened, but strangely enough these specific forms of simple and private musical enjoyment have left no trace in Greek or Roman literature. We must realize, of course, that whistling of any

kind belonged to that category of casual and inutile utterings or gestures which in antiquity were considered vulgar and not to be indulged in by people of status (Clemens Alexandrinus *Paed.* 2.7). For much of Roman history gentlemen were not even supposed to sing (Nepos *Epam.* 1.2; Macrobius *Sat.* 3.14.7). When Cicero mentions an acquaintance's love for singing, his emphasis on this person's being a *pater familias* and an *eques Romanus* testifies to the rarity of such a phenomenon (*Or.* 3.87). In this regard, as in other aspects of genteel deportment, antiquity was close to the Renaissance and the 19th century, when singing or whistling in public were seen as "the marks of clownishness and folly" (Wildeblood & Brinson 1965:214). Whistling a tune would therefore not have been compatible with the characters of many, if not most, of the *personae* in ancient literature. Apart from that, however, it is a remarkable fact that we also never meet a slave, fisherman, pimp, or soldier whistling a tune, not even in comedy.

Whistling and paralanguage

In modern Western literature activities such as whistling and humming occur mainly as concomitants of moods or mental states. To make a character whistle a tune can be used to indicate his feeling carefree and happy (for instance: whistling while one works). It can, however, also be used to convey carelessness or indifference or, in seeming contradiction, loneliness and stress, as will be illustrated later. A sensitive observer is able to interpret the different messages implied. Whistling has therefore become part of the paralinguistic repertoire of Western literature. The young Squire in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* ("syngynge he was, or floytinge, al the day", *Prol.* 91) may have been the first character in Western literature to have his personality as "a lovyere and a lusty bachelor" (*Prol.* 80) highlighted by a reference to his habit of singing and whistling (Jones 1980:286; Donaldson 1975:8). Greek and Roman literature, though not short of "lusty bachelers", offer no precedent to the Squire's carefree whistling.

With no references at all relating to musical whistling in antiquity, we will have to resist the temptation of indulging in speculation and guesswork as to the reasons for this *lacuna*. Maybe whistling was much less common than it would be later. Cultural differences may play a role here. I have noticed for instance that people in the Netherlands are more prone to whistling than (European) people in South Africa. Maybe in antiquity, if they did not sing, people hummed rather than whistled. But we are just as badly informed about humming as we are about whistling.

Whatever the case, whistling apparently formed no part of the paralinguistic stock used by Greek and Roman authors. This stock was considerable, as recent studies show (Lateiner 1996a and 1996b; Bremmer 1991; Graf 1991), and included such emotional indicators as jumping for joy and nail-biting. In many cases the use of this "silent language" is at least quantitatively not inferior to that in modern works, though it is generally qualitatively so. Compared to modern novels, for instance, the use of paralanguage by Petronius and Apuleius is unexploited and unsophisticated (Newbold 1992:136). We have seen how Petronius tempts us – and ultimately disappoints us, though through no fault of his – to believe that one of Trimalchio's

guests is actually whistling a tune. The episode – whether Plocamus is whistling through his fingers or squeaking some cheap ditty using his hand as an amplifier – is, however, still a good example of the sociological use of paralanguage, typifying this common freedman for what he is.

Whistling in the dark

Some forms of nonverbal communication are universal. Smiling and crying are as innate in humankind as tail-wagging and whimpering in dogs. Many others that may have been learned unwittingly nevertheless respond so strongly to physical and psychological needs and urges, that they come very close to being innate: clapping the hands before the eyes or the mouth, bowing the head in humiliation, tearing one's hair or holding one's head in distress. Likewise, a form of soundmaking, like muttering, humming, singing, whistling, seems to be a natural and universal way for humans to cope with a situation of worrying loneliness. Hearing his own sound reassures a person that he is alive and intact (Ostwald 1959:143). "Whistling in the dark" is a well-known phenomenon in the Western world. By what means would a Greek or a Roman have satisfied this human need, when walking lonely and frightened in a dark place? Would this situation have triggered the same psychosomatic response as today? Would he have been muttering, singing, humming, whistling maybe? We are speculating, and we will never know for sure.

Petronius tricks us once more when making it seem that he can offer us a tantalizingly close parallel to our familiar "whistling in the dark". In the famous werewolf story the narrator Nicerus tells how he and his companion arrive at the tombs outside town in the middle of the night. While his friend goes to relieve himself, Nicerus sits down singing to himself and counting the gravestones: *sedeo ego cantabundus et stelas numero* (62.4). How tempting to interpret this scene as a clever application of psychological paralanguage which has a superstitious and frightened slave indulge in an ancient equivalent of our "whistling in the dark." Since *cantare* represents many forms of musical expression we would even be justified in translating it here with "whistling." Unfortunately there is no straightforward indication that Petronius had this in mind. The only way to support such an interpretation is by seeing Nicerus' earlier remark that the moon was shining "as if it were midday" as an effort to create suspense, because of the moon's association with Hecate, goddess of all things spooky. There is much that is not certain in this episode. Since the text is evidently corrupt (*secedo ego* is a more likely reading than *sedeo ego*), *cunctabundus* ("slowly") has even been proposed for *cantabundus* (Delz 1962:682) but seems to have found no takers.

Semaphoric whistling

Where the lack of evidence leaves us guessing as to the occurrence of the whistling of tunes in antiquity, we move on safer ground when dealing with the use of whistling for a more prosaic purpose, that of nonverbal signalling. One may accept that this use of whistling goes back to times immemorial. Man will have discovered the effectiveness of whistling to attract the attention of others, or of animals, at a very

early stage. *Homo habilis* may already have used it to maintain contact while hunting or scavenging, and the first pastoral communities will have used whistling to signal their flocks and their dogs. Whistles are easier to hear than words, because they concentrate sound energy into a narrow segment of the frequency spectrum instead of spreading it. Generally they occur in the frequency range of 1000 to 4000 cycles per second to which the human ear is most sensitive (Ostwald 1959:140). A number of communities (for instance in the Pyrenees and on the Canary Islands) developed whistle systems as speech surrogates, especially for long-range communication (Sebeok 1976:881-1443). The oldest reference to the semaphoric use of whistling is in Isaiah (5:26) where the Lord whistles to summon his people: “He will raise a signal for a nation afar off, and whistle for it from the ends of the earth; and lo, swiftly, speedily it comes.” The Hebrew uses a form of the verb *shrq*, which the Septuagint and the Vulgata translate with appropriate forms of *συρίζειν* and *sibilare*, here and in the two other episodes (Isa 7:18 and Sap 10:8) where *shrq* is similarly used for the Lord’s summoning from afar.

Whistling and hissing

It may seem strange that modern translators are not unanimous in their renderings: some make the Lord whistle, but others make him hiss. Underlying this discrepancy is a particularity which will continue to bedevil our inquiry, namely the fact that antiquity did not differentiate between whistling and hissing, so that *shrq*, *συρίζειν* (Attic *συρίττειν*) and *sibilare* were used to describe either of these sounds. Where circumstantial evidence here, and in several other *loci*, favours the meaning of “whistling”, *συρίζειν* and *sibilare* are more commonly used to describe the sound of flutes (which often is akin to that of human whistling) and a variety of hissing and related sounds like that of hot iron submerged in water (Ovid *Met.* 12.279), the rustling of leaves (Catullus 4.12), the whizzing of arrows and spears (e.g. Valerius Flaccus 6.201) and the sound of the stormwind in the cordage of a ship (e.g. Silius Italicus 17.257), which particular sound, of course, can alternate between hissing and whistling. The onomatopoeic character of the verbs *shrq*, *συρίζειν* (which may derive from *shrq*) and *sibilare*, all three beginning with a sibilant, makes it evident that hissing was experienced as the primary sound. This is also borne out whenever the verbs are mentioned in the context of linguistics. Plato uses *surittein* to describe the sound of the sibilant *s* (*Tht.* 203b). The *Auctor ad Herennium* (4.31.42) and Quintilian (*Inst.* 8.6.31) use *sibilare* and *sibilus* as examples of onomatopoeia.

Hissing and whistling, when produced by humans, result from the same interaction between respiratory and oral agents. The only difference is that in hissing the oral obstruction placed in the way of the airstream is the teeth, while in the case of whistling it is the lips. In antiquity this difference was apparently felt as too slight for differentiation between the two sounds, and for the establishment of a separate terminology. The lack of differentiation continues in some of the daughter languages, for instance modern Greek, French and Spanish, where respectively *συρίζειν*, *siffler* and *silbar* describe both human whistling and the hissing of snakes.

We must therefore rely on circumstantial evidence in each case when deciding how to translate συρίζειν, *sibilare* and related words. To give an example: in a fragment of the politician-historian Sisenna (the defender of Verres) the phrase *procul consuli sibilu significare coepit* (fr. 131.1) occurs. Did the person in question signal to the consul with hisses or through whistling? As in the case of the Isaiah text mentioned earlier I would consider the addition “from afar” as an indication that the man was whistling. Hisses do not carry very far, and people will naturally switch to whistling, I would think, when a considerable distance has to be bridged. But what to do in the case of a story of Livy (25.8.11) about a treacherous Tarentine during the Hannibalic war? By making a habit of returning from hunting late every night this man tried to condition the guards to open the gates for him “at whatever time of the night he would give a signal by whistling/hissing (*sibilo*).” Did the fellow hiss or did he whistle? He may, of course, have done either, depending on the circumstances.

The Greek verb ροίζειν, as it appears in Homer, presents us with the same problem. In the *Iliad* (10.502) Odysseus gives a signal (ροίζησεν) to Diomedes to indicate that he has secured the white horses of King Rhesus for which the two of them had attacked the Thracian camp at night. In another passage (*Od.* 9.315) Polyphemus, after locking Odysseus and his men in his cave, drives his sheep to their pastures πολλῇ ροίζῳ. Ροίζειν and ροῖζος seem to have been usual terms for the (making of the) sounds with which shepherds drove their flocks (cf. Longos 2.10), and are often translated with “whistling.” According to Hesychius (s.v. σίττα, ψίττα, ψύττα), however, Greek shepherds used largely sibilous cries like “sitta” or “psitta.” It seems that this sound survived till modern times as “sst” or “scht” (Sittl 1890:223). “Hissing” might therefore in the case of Polyphemus be a better translation than “whistling.” As to Odysseus, he might have been doing either, though, having to overcome the noises of a mini-battle and the sound of trampling horses, one would expect him to whistle and not to hiss.

The catcall

With the following usage of whistling as a nonverbal language substitute during antiquity we are, thanks to Cicero, not dependent on conjecture and circumstantial evidence. It is the catcall: whistling as an expression of disapprobation or contempt, still widely in use today. On a psychological level it is related to the use of all kinds of pneumatic acts for apotropaic purposes, about which later. Though most of our information about the catcall stems from Roman sources, it is already mentioned by Plato (*Leg.* 700c) and Demosthenes (18.265) as one of the professional hazards of the actors and orators of their time. The fourth century grammarian Nonius uses this kind of whistling as an argument to connect the vulgar Latin form *sifilare* etymologically with the Homeric hapax σιφλοῦν (“destroy”), because this specific use of *sibilare/sifilare* aims at “destroying” an orator or an actor. He defines *sifilare* as an abusive use of whistling by the populace when someone is driven off the stage: *cum sifilationibus quis exploditur* (531).

The verb *explodere* for “driving off the stage” has its origin in the (nowadays often rhythmic) clapping that makes it impossible for an actor or orator to continue.

Normally clapping the hands (applause) was and is an expression of approbation, but when it takes place as a deliberate and continuous interruption it expresses, of course, the opposite. In antiquity this kind of clapping was – as it is today – often accompanied or replaced by whistling and verbal abuse. Cicero mentions several incidents that took place during his lifetime. Referring to the comedian Eros he says that he *e scaena non modo sibilis sed etiam convicio explodebatur* (*Q Rosc.* 11.30). In a letter to Atticus (2.18) of 59 B.C. Cicero relates how Caesar's friend Quintus Fufius Calenus is being pursued by the people *clamoribus et conviciis et sibilis*. Some years earlier Cicero had made fun of the brother of Publius Clodius, Appius, by describing how this person had tried to sneak into the Circus through a dark corridor (humorously nicknamed *Via Appia* by Cicero) but was nevertheless spotted by the people and treated to such an outburst of sudden whistling (*repentinis sibilis*) that the horses that were there took fright (*Sest.* 61.126).

How can we be sure that the noise produced by the disapproving Roman crowd was whistling and not hissing? Cicero himself has been so good as to provide a clue. In another letter to Atticus (1.16) of 61 B.C. he boasts of his own popularity at that time, adding that he is receiving ovations at the games “without (hearing) a single shepherd's whistle” (*sine ulla pastoricia fistula*). Obviously he refers here to the absence of catcalls during his appearances, and just as obviously *pastoricia fistula* can only be a metaphor for whistling. Had Cicero been referring to hissing, he would have used a different figure.

The catcall, therefore, was already practised in antiquity in the same form and under similar circumstances as today: to interrupt and drive away unpopular actors, speakers and politicians. It is therefore not surprising that in England a taboo still exists on whistling in the dressing rooms of theatres. The superstition that this will provoke failure on the stage has led to drastic counteractions: the guilty whistler has to go out, turn around three times in a *rite de passage*, knock, and wait to be invited again (Opie & Tatem 1989:441). The fact that whistling in some areas, e.g. in the United States, can nowadays also express enthusiastic approval, may be slightly confusing for first-time British performers in that country. In Greece and Rome, however, the catcall was always derogatory.

The references of Cicero to the phenomenon, those mentioned above and others (*Pis.* 65; *Par.* 3.26), all relate to actions by the people in theatres, the Circus and on the streets. There is no evidence of a *sibilatio* ever having taken place in the senate. No doubt for the conservatives, Cicero's *boni*, whistling would have been severely *infra dig*. It was one of those things that was associated with ill-breeding. Clemens Alexandrinus places it on the same level as spitting and wiping one's nose in public (*Paed.* 2.7). Understandably therefore, when Cicero mentions it in connection with senatorial politics, it is the others, the popular party, who are stooping so low as to incite “even moderate people” to whistle: *populares isti iam etiam modestos homines sibilare docuerunt* (*Att.* 2.19).¹

1 When Nonius some centuries later still refers to the *populares* as using whistling to drive someone away (Non. 531), the term has by that time, of course, lost its party-political meaning, and refers to the people in general.

The wolf-whistle

Finally there is one other application of whistling for nonverbal expression which occurs in the modern world and seems to have been practised in almost exactly the same way in antiquity. Unfortunately the evidence for the existence of the notorious wolf-whistle, communicating sexual interest mainly by males of the human species, is very scant for the Greek and Roman past. It consists of only one episode in Plautus' *Mercator* (403-408). Here the father Demipho says to his son Charinus with reference to the beautiful slavegirl they both secretly love and whom the son pretends to have bought for his mother: "I can't permit it. She is hardly the proper sort of person to attend your mother." Char.: "Why not?" Dem.: "Because it would cause scandal if such a beauty were the attendant of a wife and mother; when she passes through the streets all the men would look at her, leer, nod and wink and whistle (*sibilent*)."

What Demipho pretends to fear is that his wife will indirectly become the focus of a vulgar kind of attention through this girl. In modern sociological texts phenomena like the wolf-whistle are ranked under the heading of "breaches of civil inattention", i.e. transgressions against the civilized principle that unacquainted persons respect each other's privacy to the extent of avoiding prolonged eye-contact and even pretending not to be aware of each other's presence (Gardner 1980:328-356). Nowadays one can become painfully aware of the validity of these rules in places like elevators and waiting rooms. In civilisations that differ from each other in time and/or place these rules will, of course, differ in degree and content. Nevertheless the wolf-whistle – and its verbal equivalents – will always rank as one of the most serious breaches wherever a degree of civil inattention is valued, because it also directs the attention of bystanders to the victim, and so turns a woman into a sexual lust object *en plein public*. Though Demipho's wife would not be the primary object of this undignified attention, she would nevertheless find herself in an embarrassing position, the more so because of her social status. There is therefore nothing wrong with Demipho's reasoning.

Did the lustful gentlemen whistle, or hiss? We cannot say. One could make a case for whistling in a noisy public street. On the other hand "pssjt" seems to be the preferred sound in some Mediterranean countries nowadays, as several Northern European girls have assured me. We can also not say whether the wolf-whistle was as much of an institution as it became later in Western society. The evidence is too meagre. We even have to reckon with a possibility in the *Mercator* episode that we are dealing with a metaphor for "chatter" or "whisper", because of the conspicuous absence of any other verb denoting talk of any sort. If the wolf-whistle did exist, however, it should not surprise us that it does not occur in the love poetry of, for instance, Catullus or Ovid. Naturally it would have been too vulgar a phenomenon to have been allowed a place in such works.

Whistling in magic and superstition

Having dealt with musical whistling, and with the use of whistling as paralanguage, it remains for us to treat its place in magic and superstition. Columella in his *De re rustica* (2.3.2) advises the farmer not to give oxen their fodder all at once at the end

of their working day, but a little at a time, and to let them drink inbetween. If they refuse to drink they should be encouraged by whistling: *oportet sibilo...adlectari, quo libentius bibant*. The belief that whistling stimulates drinking is probably based on the similarity that is felt to exist between the flow of sound and that of water. We are therefore dealing with a case of sympathetic magic. Its persistence till in later times can be illustrated with a quote from an English work of the 16th century: “When I lead a horse to the water, if he will not drink, what can I doo, but whistle him?”² The assertiveness of Columella and of the English quotation might tempt one to think that we are dealing here with a case of subtle animal psychology rather than with magic or superstition, and that the trick might actually work. I have, however, not come across any modern followers of the practice. Two obsolete Dutch proverbs betray a considerable degree of exasperation with the procedure when directed at the opposite end of the animal’s physiology: “‘t Is vergeefs gefloten als het peerd niet pissen wil”; and: “Vergheefs men fluyt en houd men stil, wanneer het peerd niet pissen wil” (*Woordenboek den Nederlandsche Taal* 1920:4587).

Together with blowing and hissing, whistling occurs in the superstition and magical practices of many groups and civilizations, especially in connection with spirits. One should, of course, not consider it a contradiction that on the one hand these sounds are believed to be useful in warding off demons, illnesses, and other forms of evil (Heim 1892:479(52), 481-482(65); Sittl 1890:121),³ while on the other hand it is believed that they attract them. Magic and superstition are famous for defying logic. A Chinese Taoist text from the T’ang Dynasty (AD 618-907) states it neutrally by saying that a good whistler “commands the attention of the whole world of spirits” (Edwards 1957:218). Plotinus (*Enn.* 2.9.14.) names blowing (πρόσπνευσίς) and hissing or whistling (σιγμός τῆς φώνης)⁴ as examples of sounds used in magic. In the Old Testament there are several references connecting whistling with places of destruction, e.g. Jer 19:8 where the Lord says that he will make Jerusalem “a horror, a thing to be whistled at; everyone who passes it will be horrified and will whistle.”⁵ The whistling here must be apotropaic – in this case against the demons of destruction – and therefore related to the whistling (συσίττειν) which the emperor Julian later observed (*Ep.* 79)⁶ as employed, together with the sign of the cross, by Christians passing pagan cult images. It is once more impossible to say whether this apotropaic practice demanded whistling or hissing. Probably either would do, taking into account that other pneumonic acts, like blowing, were also used for this purpose. In some Christian and Islamic communities whistling used to be (and maybe still is) connected with the devil (“the devil’s music”) and considered to make the mouth impure for a long period. Women especially should refrain from whistling (Lasch

2 Harvey, *Plaine Percivall* (1590) 22.

3 On the use of whistling in the cult of Mithras see Dieterich 1923:40. The Mithraic context of Dieterich’s magical text has been disputed, see Hinnells 1975:2.379, 414.

4 The dual meaning (whistling and hissing) of σιγμός and σίζειν is illustrated by e.g. Plutarch *Mor.* 2.593 (= *De gen.* 24) and Homer *Od.* 9.394.

5 Similarly 1 Kings 9:8 (Israel), Jer 49:17 (Edom), Jer 50:13 (Babylon), Ez 27:36 (Tyrus), Zeph 2:15 (Jerusalem).

6 In ed. Bidez-Cumont (Budé); *Ep.* 78 ed. Hertlein (Teubner); *Ep.* 19 ed. Care Wright (Loeb).

1915:519; *Encyclopaedia of superstition* 1903:344-345). Aristotle (*An. post.* 2.94b) also mentions whistling or hissing (σίζειν) for frightening off demons and spirits (οἱ ἐν τῷ ταρτάρῳ). His statement that it was applied during thunderstorms is not supported by Aristophanes (*Vesp.* 626, with schol.) and Pliny (*HN* 28.25) who describe the appropriate sound for this purpose as *poppysmus*: clucking with the tongue. The latter sound fits, of course, better with the sound of thunder claps, if one thinks of imitative magic, and the undefined ποφεῖν (“making a sound”, i.a. “knock”) which Aristotle mentions in addition to *sizein*, will refer to this *poppysmus*. Very possibly, of course, several ways of coping with a thunderstorm existed in different regions, or even next to each other.

Other magical uses of whistling may have been in vogue in ancient times, but we have no evidence for their existence among the Greeks or Romans. Still widespread among sailing people, also in Europe, is whistling to provoke the wind. The opposite, of course, is advisable when a storm threatens and amongst some groups of fishermen, to stay on the safe side, one never whistles at all when on board ship (Opie & Tatem 1989:441; Lasch 1915:589-590). The whistling here is obviously a form of imitative magic. Belief in the evocative effect of whistling on spirits in general, not only those of the wind, is widespread, despite the seeming contrast with its apotropaic use. This undoubtedly has to do with the nature of the sound of whistling. In places devoid of human life the eerie, anonymous sound of whistling can easily be connected with demons and spirits, and whistling may be thought to lure or provoke them. In many societies whistling is therefore not allowed in caves, in forests, and especially not at night-time (Lasch 1915:590-592). Amongst miners in Great Britain a taboo exists on whistling below ground (Opie & Tatem 1989:441). As a last use of whistling which occurs in our modern world we might add whistling as an expression of surprise, which seems to have a rather recent origin (*Oxford English Dictionary* 1989, s.v. “whistle 3a”).

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