The Etymologies of Comedy

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"I would strongly advise you, Mr Worthing, to try and acquire some relations as soon as possible, and to make a definite effort to produce at any rate one parent, of either sex, before the season is quite over."

OSCAR WILDE, The Importance of Being Earnest

Since putative parents are so often the cause of comic confusion, it seems appropriate that the very word comedy can lay claim to no fewer than three separate fathers. Some have merely poetic value and are no more legitimate than Falstaff's relation to Hal. And yet by the same token, since they are the cause that is wit, if not wisdom, they should not be summarily dismissed. Let us weigh the claims serially, if not seriously.

Comedy was born at night. At least this is the conclusion of some long-ago scholars who derived κωμοθεία from κῶμα sleep and ψήθη song. The ancients believed essential truths were evident in their very speech, that words could both denote and describe. Nomen omen, as the Romans rhymed it. Hence certain Byzantine scholars discovered κῶμα in comedy and pronounced the genre a creature of night. No one disputes the second verbal element. We are indeed dealing with a kind of song which figuratively and often literally ends harmoniously on the tonic chord. But κωμοθεία is linguistically impossible, although there are still some whimsical minds that allow a filigree of fancy to outweigh a philology of fact and give some credence to this derivation. But since comic spirit traditionally disregards reality, we too

1 The "Helen Ode" of Aeschylus' Agamemnon (lines 681ff) best illustrates the ancients' belief in this principle. There the chorus puns on δείσι in speculating how Helen came to be named "with such thorough etymology" ἐς τὸ πῶν ἑττούμας. So completely destructive, she proved to be ἔλαιος, ἐλαιός, ἔλεστοις (line 689), "Hell for ships, hell for men, hell for cities." This linguistic phenomenon is treated at length in Plato's Cratylus; see also W. B. Stanford, Greek Metaphor (Oxford 1936) 115, and William D. Woodhead, Etymologizing in Greek Literature from Homer to Philo Judaeus (Toronto 1928).

2 See G. Kaibel, Comicorum Graecorum Fragmenta (Berlin 1899), who cites the author of Περὶ τῆς κωμοθείας, 14; schol. in Dion. Thrax 14; and Tzet. Proleg. in Lyoph. 34, and Περὶ διαφορὰς ποιητῶν 35 and 38.

3 All comatose conjectures are definitively dispelled by H. Frisk, Griechisches etymologisches Wörterbuch II (Heidelberg 1970) 61-62.
can acknowledge that even if κῶμα is not true, it is at least beautiful.

What then would a Nightsong be? Perchance a dream. On several occasions Freud equated the psychodynamics of dream and comedy. In fact, he once referred to his essay on comedy as the ‘twin brother’ to his essay on dreams. These mental actions have many important features in common, among which, punning word-play, the relaxation of inhibition liberating ‘primary process thinking’, and not least important, a temporary return to childhood.

In both dream and comedy, the impossible wish comes true. In each case the aim is pleasure, and the joy comes with no loss of energy or pang of conscience—the expense of spirit borne free. Plato describes the dream process as one in which, as reason slumbers, “unlawful pleasures are awakened.” Schattenfreude, so to speak. In dreams, says Plato, the animalistic and ‘uncivilized’ aspect of man, τὸ ... θηριωδῆς τε καὶ ἁγριον, ‘kicks up its heels’, κλίφωτα (Republic 571c). This is the dance of comedy, indeed the very antic advocated by Wrong Logic in Aristophanes’ Clouds (1078):

Χρῶ τῇ φύσει, κλίφωτα, γέλα, νόμιζε μηδὲν αἰχρόν

Indulge your lusting, kick your heels, laugh up—remember—nothing’s shameful!

Plato censures what Aristophanes celebrates, but both recognize the characteristic action of both comedy and dream as κλίφωτα, ‘frisky kicking up’.

And κῶμα is a rare word with rare connotations, whenever it ap-

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5 Freud’s Interpretation of Dreams was published in 1900. A more recent psychoanalytic restatement of the dream-process may be found in Louis Breger, “Function of Dreams,” Journal of Abnormal Psychology 72, mon.suppl. to no.5 (1967). On the gratification of unconscious impulses in dreams, see 5ff. Especially apposite is Breger’s relation of sleep to childhood (19ff): “Sleep is a unique state; it is probably the single most ‘infantile’ activity we engage in. That is, it persists from infancy with very little change . . . throughout life while other basic activities undergo tremendous modifications . . . [Sleep] manifests itself the same in the adult as in the infant. The comfortable warm bed, the relative lack of stimulus input, the lack of motor output, or, indeed, any interchange with the external environment, all of these factors recreate a state present in earliest infancy and contribute to ‘regression’.”

6 In his edition of the Clouds (Oxford 1968), K. J. Dover argues that φύσε, usually translated ‘nature’, here means simply ‘sexual desire’ (227, on line 1075).
pears instead of the more common ἐπνοεῖ. It can have an erotic sense of letting go, not merely nodding off. In Iliad 14.359, for example, Hypnos, the Sleep god himself, declares that he has covered Zeus with an especially soft slumber, μαλακῶν κῶμα. This is, of course, just after Zeus and Hera have made love. The sense of indulgence and release adds a kind of metalinguistic validity to the alleged etymology of comedy. Indeed, what they lacked in philological acumen, the Byzantine scholars seemed to have made up in psychological intuition. Several of them argued that κῶμα begat comedy because of the uninhibiting nature of the nocturnal mentality: this ‘special time’, καυρός, is especially ripe for comedy. As Körte explains, “κῶμα, der Schlaf [spielt] eine ziemliche Rolle, weil die Landleute ihre Spottlieder angeblich nur nachts zur Schlafenzzeit in der Stadt vorzutragen wagten.”

Furthermore, dreams are often likened to comedy by the very characters who enact them:

haec nihilo esse mihi videntur setius quam somnia.

(Plautus, Menaechmi 1047)

I have had a dream... The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report what my dream was. I will get Peter Quince to write a ballet of this dream. (Shakespeare, Midsummer Night's Dream IV.ii.207ff)

Last but not least there is eros. Like comedy, night is instinctively sensual. In Shelley's Ode it can actually seduce the daylight: “kiss her until she be wearied out.” Moreover, only at night would Cupid visit Psyche, and according to the nocturna visio recounted by Apuleius (Metamorphoses 6.24), the child of their union was...Voluptas. So much for the truth in the false etymology κῶμα.

7 Cf. Hippocrates' emphatic distinction between ἐπνοεῖ and κῶμα, Epidem. 3.6 κατεῖχε δὲ ἦ τὸ κῶμα συνεχέσ, οὐχ ἐπνοεῖς, “continuous coma, not to be confused with sleep.” See also the comment made by Hesych. s.v. κῶμα: ἐπνοεῖ ληθάδος, καταφορά ἐπου βαθῆς “lethargic sleep, an attack of deep sleep.”

8 μαλακῶν κῶμα is also the ‘soft sleep’ which dispels sexual longing at Od. 18.201. In Sappho 2.8 (Lobel/Page), the poetess bids Aphrodite enter her grove, promising a κῶμα (trance?) induced by what emanates from the foliage. For further discussion of this word's peculiarities, see Denys Page, Sappho and Alcaeus (Oxford 1955) 37.

9 See Kaibel, op.cit. (supra n.2): Περὶ τῆς κομῳδίας 14; schol. in Dion. Thrax 14; Etym. Magn. 16; Tzetz. Proleg. in Lycoph. lines 11–12, 34.

10 RE 11 (1921) 1216 s.v. Κομῳδία.
The first genealogy proposes a time, the second a place. Many scholars have called comedy a 'country song', deriving its first element from κώμη, village. Aristotle gives credence to this derivation (Poetics 1448a35ff), and its validity has been argued in the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and to a lesser extent even in our own day. Why country song? Aristotle's conjecture is provocative: the 'comedians', οἱ κωμῳδοὶ, were originally a group of roisterers who had to take to the hamlets with their singing after being kicked out of the city proper (Poetics 1448a38). Either their subject matter or their behavior—or both—offended the urbanites. Aristotle does not indicate whether he believes this happened but once or regularly, on every festive occasion, but we need not hunt after historical truth here. For κώμη is related to comedy because the country has always stood vividly in man's imagination as a place of greater freedom. In Plato's fretful description quoted above, dreams bring out 'uncivilized' fantasies, and the term ἀγροῦνον may be more literally rendered as 'rustic'. Elsewhere, Plato makes κώμη the antithesis of πόλις (Laws 626c) and a passage in Thucydides (1.5) suggests that the significant distinction was that the πόλις was walled and the κώμη wide open. The myth survives in latter-day fables of farmers' daughters and is certainly ingrained in the mind of one noted Danish prince (III.ii.119-23):

Hamlet: Lady, shall I lie in your lap?
Ophelia: No, my lord.
Hamlet: I mean, my head on your lap?
Ophelia: Ay, my lord.
Hamlet: Do you think I meant country matters?

11 According to Diom. Ars gramm. 3.9.2., the Roman polymath Varro held this view. Other ancient supporters are cited by Kaibel, op.cit. (supra n.2) 6, 11 and 14. The mediaeval and Renaissance opinions are discussed by A. Philip McMahon, "Seven Questions on Aristotelian Definitions of Tragedy and Comedy," HSCP 40 (1929) 97-198. Dante is among the many who, even without direct Aristotelian influence, trace comedy's relation to κώμη. And recently, Albin Lesky has conceded that the notion of κώμη has "einen wahren Kern," in Geschichte der griechischen Literatur² (Bern 1963) 219.

12 The Latin rus, 'country', may be akin to Avestan rave, 'wideness', as in ravas-.tarait, (what moves in the open), as well as Greek σφός, 'wide', 'far-reaching' and Gothic rums (cf. German Raum and English room). Thus we find the persistent connotation of 'unbounded expanse' and 'free range'. Cf. A. Walde and J. B. Hofmann, Lateinisches etymologisches Wörterbuch² II (Heidelberg 1965) 454.

18 Cf. Theophrastus' definition of ἄγρωκλα, Char. 4.4. Perhaps the most striking trait of this 'boor' is his literal tendency to "expose too much of himself": καὶ ἀναβεβλημένος ἀνω τοῦ γόνατος καθιζάειν, ὁπετε τὰ γυμνα αὐτοῦ ὑπέφαίνεινα.
Indeed, the persistent association between license and ‘country matters’ has some historical validity. At times in the ancient world, freer behavior was sanctioned when it was geographically beyond the jurisdiction of the city fathers. Logically, the country is where fertility rites would take place, and as Sir James Frazer amply demonstrated, these occasions have always involved uninhibited speech and sexuality. Many diverse cultures have had reinvigoration festivals characterised by ‘stepping out of bounds’. Beyond the city limits there was orgiastic indulgence during Akitu, the Babylonian New Year. Beyond the city limits there was orgiastic indulgence following the expiatory solemnity of the Jewish Yom Kippur. That so much of comedy involves country matters is no accident. That so many comedies take place in the country is no accident either. One thinks of the forest of Arden, or better still, the enchanted wood outside Shakespeare’s Athens.

It may have been so dark on the night Comedy was conceived in the country that—as in so many Menandrian plays—the mother could not recognize the father. But the linguistic doctors illumined all with their post-partum perceptivity. To the educated eye, the true father of κωμῳδία is κώμος, the wild wine-soaked, no-holds-barred revel. Indeed, modern etymologists and students of Greek universally derive the word from κώμος. And yet, this does not call for a serious historical search for the actual revel which may have engendered the theatrical form, for κώμος is most importantly a state of mind. As a psychologist has defined it, Comedy provides a “holiday for the superego.”

15 Both Babylonian Akitu and Hebrew Yom Kippur are typical of New Year festivals of the ancient Near East. They have many features in common, including the fact that ‘excess’ follows abstinence, i.e. the period of jubilation is preceded by one of fasting, purification and atonement. Of significance for the present argument is that the festival license took place outside the boundaries of the town. The rites of Akitu are epitomized and analyzed by Theodor H. Gaster, Thespis: Ritual Myth and Drama in the Ancient Near East (New York 1961) 62–64. It was traditional at the end of Yom Kippur for eligible girls to dance publicly outside the town, inspiring the arrangement of many a marriage. The Talmud acknowledges that these occasions sometimes lapsed into orgiastic events. See Mircea Eliade, The Myth of the Eternal Return: or Cosmos and History, transl. Willard R. Trask (Princeton 1965), 61. Also Gaster, op. cit. 42.
16 A. W. Pickard-Cambridge vehemently asserts that κώμος is the only possible etymology in Dithyramb, Tragedy and Comedy, rev. T. B. L. Webster (Oxford 1962) 132.
17 See most recently Frisk, op. cit. (supra n.3) 63: “κωμῳδός, ‘Sänger eines κώμος’.” From the agent noun κωμῳδός comes the action noun κωμῳδία.
18 As does Pickard-Cambridge, op. cit. (supra n.16) 151ff.
19 Ernst Kris, Psychoanalytic Exploration in Art (New York 1952) 185.
One may best understand the relationship as that between twin brothers. C. L. Barber insightfully argues that “the holiday occasion and the comedy are parallel manifestations of the same pattern of culture.” Holiday and Comedy enfranchise limited license. Κώμος is a rule-breaking revel in the flesh, Comedy an orgy in the mind, but the two phenomena have one physical reaction in common: laughter.

But psychically, all three etymologies are related and legitimate. Dreams, ‘country matters’ and revels are licensed indulgences of fantasy, releases from civilization and its discontents with all’s well that ends well. And, though κώμος is the ‘true’ parent of Comedy, the enormous poetic validity of the other hypotheses gives pause. For indeed there is tantalizing if tenuous evidence that all three words may have a single remote source in the lexical Shangri-La of Indo-European. They may all carry a similar connotation of ‘shared activity’. In fact the Greeks themselves seem to have linked κώμος and κώμη. The adjective ευκώμος can mean both ‘in the village’, (Hesiod, Works and Days 344) and ‘of a revel’ (Pindar, Olympian 2.47). Several scholars trace these two words to the same Indo-European root *koi, to share, associate. They also relate them to other cognates including κοινός.

More mist surrounds the origins of κώμα, yet some, following K. Brugmann, link it with Indo-European *kei, ‘to lie down’, a root also found in κείμαι. Most interesting, Boisacq goes as far as to relate Gothic haims, ‘village’, to both κώμα and κώμη. This free-floating notion would imply that sleep, village and κώμος all offer opportunities for untrammeled freedom. Which they do, in life if not in lexicons.

How seriously are we to allege this triple linkage? At least to the

80 C. L. Barber, Shakespeare's Festive Comedy (Cleveland and New York 1963) 78.
81 Kris, op.cit. (supra n.19) 226.
82 The reading ευκώμος (the meaning ‘in the village’ is given s.v. κώμη in a scholion to Proclus) is proposed by Stephanus of Byzantium; other mss containing Hesiod's works, however, read ευχώρος. That ευκώμος is the correct reading is indisputably proven by its appearance in a newly published papyrus, P.Mich. inv.6828, examined by M. L. West, BASP (1966) 69ff. Friedrich Solmsen adopts the reading ευκώμος for this reason in his OCT ed. (1970) of Hesiod, Opera et Dies.
83 Cf. A. Bezzenberger, Beiträge zur Kunde der indogerm. Sprache 27 (Göttingen 1904) 168; Frisk, loc.cit. (supra n.3); P. Chantaine, Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque II (Paris 1970) 606, who gives the root as *kei; E. Boisacq, Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque (Heidelberg 1938) 544.
84 Boisacq, op.cit. (supra n.23) 543–44 and 426; Frisk, op.cit. (supra n.3) II.61. Cf. K. Brugmann, Griech. Grammatik (Munich 1913) 317.
85 Boisacq, op.cit. (supra n.23) 543–44.
extent that they offer three valid dimensions to the idea of Comedy. For it matters less who Comedy's true father was than what Comedy's true nature is. Hence we find all three suggestions helpful and can say that Comedy, like Helen of Troy, is named ἐκ τὸ πᾶν ἐτητύμως: a dreamsong of a revel in the country.26

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