

The Etymologies of Comedy

Erich Segal

“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 *κωμωδία* from *κῶμα* sleep and *ᾠδή* 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.¹ Hence certain Byzantine scholars discovered *κῶμα* in comedy and pronounced the genre a creature of night.² 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 *κῶμα* 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.³ 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 *ελεῖν* in speculating how Helen came to be named “with such thorough etymology” *ἐς τὸ πᾶν ἐτητύμως*. So completely destructive, she proved to be *ἑλένας*, *ἑλανδρος*, *ἑλέπολις* (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 κωμωδίας*, 14; schol. in Dion. Thrax 14; and Tzetz. *Proleg. in Lycoph.* 34, and *Περὶ διαφορᾶς 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.⁴ 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.⁵

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 . . . θηριῶδες τε καὶ ἄγριον, 'kicks up its heels', κικιρᾷ (*Republic* 571c). This is the dance of comedy, indeed the very antic advocated by Wrong Logic in Aristophanes' *Clouds* (1078):⁶

Χρῶ τῆ φύσει, κικίρτα, γέλα, νόμιζε μηδὲν αἰσχρόν
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 κικιρᾷ, 'frisky kicking up'.

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

⁴ Cf. the fifteenth of Freud's *Introductory Lectures* (1907), transl. Joan Riviere, in *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* (New York 1952) 248.

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 φύσις, usually translated 'nature', here means simply 'sexual desire' (227, on line 1075).

pears instead of the more common ὕπνος.⁷ 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, μαλακὸν κῶμα. This is, of course, just after Zeus and Hera have made love.⁸ 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', καιρός, is especially ripe for comedy.⁹ As Körte explains, "κῶμα, der Schlaf [spielt] eine ziemliche Rolle, weil die Landleute ihre Spottlieder angeblich nur nachts zur Schlafenszeit in der Stadt vorzutragen wagten."¹⁰

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 ὕπνος and κῶμα, *Epidem.* 3.6 κατεῖχε δὲ ἢ τὸ κῶμα συνεχές, οὐχ ὕπνωδες, "continuous coma, not to be confused with sleep." See also the comment made by Hesych. s.v. κῶμα: ὕπνος ληθώδης, καταφορὰ ὕπνου βαθέος "lethargic sleep, an attack of deep sleep."

⁸ μαλακὸν 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 κωμωδίας 14; schol. in Dion. Thrax 14; *Etym. Magn.* 16; Tzetz. *Proleg. in Lycoph.* lines 11–12, 34.

¹⁰ RE 11 (1921) 1216 s.v. ΚΟΜΩΔΙΕ.

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.¹¹ Why country song? Aristotle's conjecture is provocative: the 'comedians', *οἱ κωμωδοί*, 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.¹² In Plato's fretful description quoted above, dreams bring out 'uncivilized' fantasies, and the term *ἄγροιον* may be more literally rendered as 'rustic'.¹³ 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 Literatur*² (Bern 1963) 219.

¹² The Latin *rus*, 'country', may be akin to Avestan *ravo*, 'wideness', as in *ravas-čarāt*, (what moves in the open', as well as Greek *εὐρύς*, '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 Wörterbuch*⁴ II (Heidelberg 1965) 454.

¹³ Cf. Theophrastus' definition of *ἀγροικία*, *Char.* 4.4. Perhaps the most striking trait of this 'boor' is his literal tendency to "expose too much of himself": *καὶ ἀναβεβλημένος ἄνω τοῦ γόνατος καθιζάνειν, ὥστε τὰ γυνὰ αὐτοῦ ὑπερφαίνεσθαι*.

Indeed, the persistent association between license and 'country matters' has some historical validity.¹⁴ 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 Akîtu, the Babylonian New Year. Beyond the city limits there was orgiastic indulgence following the expiatory solemnity of the Jewish Yom Kippur.¹⁵ 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 κωμωδία is κῶμος, the wild wine-soaked, no-holds-barred revel.¹⁶ Indeed, modern etymologists and students of Greek universally derive the word from κῶμος.¹⁷ And yet, this does not call for a serious historical search for the actual revel which may have engendered the theatrical form,¹⁸ for κῶμος is most importantly a state of mind. As a psychologist has defined it, Comedy provides a "holiday for the superego."¹⁹

¹⁴ Cf. Eric Partridge, *Shakespeare's Bawdy* (London 1947) 95 on 'country matters'.

¹⁵ Both Babylonian Akîtu 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 Akîtu are epitomized and analyzed by Theodor H. Gaster, *Thespis: Ritual Myth and Drama in the Ancient Near East*² (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*,² transl. Willard R. Trask (Princeton 1965), 61. Also Gaster, *op.cit.* 42.

¹⁶ A. W. Pickard-Cambridge vehemently asserts that κῶμος is the only possible etymology in *Dithyramb, Tragedy and Comedy*², rev. T. B. L. Webster (Oxford 1962) 132.

¹⁷ See most recently Frisk, *op. cit.* (*supra* n.3) 63: "κωμ-φδός, 'Sänger eines κῶμος'." From the agent noun κωμωδός comes the action noun κωμωδία.

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.”²⁰ Holiday and Comedy enfranchise limited license. *Κῶμος* 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.²¹

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 *κῶμος* 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 *κῶμος* and *κῶμη*. The adjective *ἐγκῶμιος* can mean both ‘in the village’, (Hesiod, *Works and Days* 344) and ‘of a revel’ (Pindar, *Olympian* 2.47).²² 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*.²³

More mist surrounds the origins of *κῶμα*, yet some, following K. Brugmann, link it with Indo-European *kei, ‘to lie down’, a root also found in *κεῖμαι*.²⁴ Most interesting, Boisacq goes as far as to relate Gothic *haims*, ‘village’, to both *κῶμα* and *κῶμη*.²⁵ This free-floating notion would imply that sleep, village and *κῶμος* all offer opportunities for untrammelled freedom. Which they do, in life if not in lexicons.

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

²⁰ C. L. Barber, *Shakespeare’s Festive Comedy* (Cleveland and New York 1963) 78.

²¹ Kris, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.19) 226.

²² The reading *ἐγκῶμιον* (the meaning ‘in the village’ is given *s.v.* *κῶμη* in a scholion to Proclus) is proposed by Stephanus of Byzantium; other mss containing Hesiod’s works, however, read *ἐγχώριον*. That *ἐγκῶμιον* 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 *ἐγκῶμιον* for this reason in his *OCT* ed. (1970) of Hesiod, *Opera et Dies*.

²³ Cf. A. Bezzenberger, *Beiträge zur Kunde der indogerm. Sprache* 27 (Göttingen 1904) 168; Frisk, *loc.cit.* (*supra* n.3); P. Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque* II (Paris 1970) 606, who gives the root as *kei; E. Boisacq, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque*³ (Heidelberg 1938) 544.

²⁴ Boisacq, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.23) 543–44 and 426; Frisk, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.3) II.61. Cf. K. Brugmann, *Griech. Grammatik*⁴ (Munich 1913) 317.

²⁵ 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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²⁶ For valuable suggestions I am indebted to Gregory Nagy and Judith P. Hallett.