

THE “RULES” OF MOCKERY: FOLK HUMOUR AND SYMBOLIC INVERSION IN GREEK CHILDREN’S PRETEND PLAY¹

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INTRODUCTION

Traditional socialization theories support their arguments for play’s function as rehearsal of adult roles, primarily by emphasizing play situations, where reality is imitated.

Play according to this structural functionalist model is seen in terms of social needs, while socialization is understood as replication of the existing social structure. (cf. GOUGOULIS, 1993: 157).

Both the imitative character of play and the conventional theory of socialization have been disputed by scholars interested in the process of social change (TURNER 1974; STUTTON-SMITH 1972) and by social scientists, who have adopted a subjectivist approach to children (e. g. HARDMAN 1974; SCHWARTZMAN 1977), known as the New Sociology of Childhood (JAMES-PROUT 1990).

While the first group stresses play’s innovative functions, the second stream challenges the imitation model of play, in the context of examining children as active participants rather than passive recipients of the socialization process. Play in that sense is examined as a creative activity that reconstructs rather than mimics reality,² a view already heralded in the years of structural functionalism by researchers such as RAUM and FORTES. FORTES (1938) in his description of the Tallensi children’s play was one of the first anthropologists to discuss pretending as an act of rearrangement rather than imitation of the “real” world.

RAUM (1940: 255), on the other hand, warned against simplistic understandings of play’s relationship to reality. In his ethnography of Chaga children in South East Africa, he argued that symbolic play differs from reality in that the acts imitated perform a different function from the original pattern and in that the mentality of

¹ An earlier form of this article was presented at the International Toy Conference, Halmstad, Sweden, 17–21 June 1996.

² It is not my intention to reiterate the debate on the existence of objective reality vs the subjective construction of multiple realities. I prefer to resort to GARVEY’s adoption of the play-non play distinction (1985: 576) usually practiced by the children themselves during the play sequences I observed. (cf. playing at “school” with playmobil figures later in this article). In other words, reality here is meant as “actual” or “for real” situations experienced or witnessed by children as a source for make believe.

As the authors mentioned above do not discuss the issue, I assume that they are using the term “reality” in its commonsensical meaning.

the imitator and the imitated differ profoundly.³ RAUM's point becomes most evident in his report of Chaga children's satirical pretense, which reminds us that, after all, the adult world does not exclusively lend itself to emulation but also to mockery.

It is well known that children's pretense is enabled through shared knowledge, i. e. representations of events that are similar enough to establish a coherent plot line and consensus on role content of the depicted characters. (NELSON and SEIDMAN, 1984). VYGOTSKY (1985: 543) was probably the first researcher to indicate that this consensus is based on hidden rules regulating role appropriate behaviour during pretend play (GARVEY 1991: 82). Children's make-believe, however, does not draw its play themes exclusively from "real events". The media and especially TV, movies and stories (NELSON and SEIDMAN 1984: 47; SUTTON-SMITH 1986: 203–205; BROUGÈRE and MANSON 1989–1990; GOUGOULIS 1992) constitute common sources for the creation or enrichment of play's imaginary domains. Fictional domains may also provide the matrix for the hidden rules⁴ of make-believe behaviour. If pretend play is understood as a process by which social and physical reality is decomposed and reconstructed (GARVEY and BERNDT 1975: 20), this process of rearrangement or reconstruction may well involve combinations drawing of factual and fictional elements simultaneously.

Contextualization of ludic encounters should, then, take into account both the social and cultural context in which play forms are generated and the relationship of play forms to other cultural genres. It is the latter relationship that this paper attempts to explore by discussing the link between folk humour genres and some Greek children's ludic representations of their school experience.

The examples are drawn from one year of intensive fieldwork based on participant observation, conducted in 1989 in Palaia Phocaea, Attica, Greece.⁵

³ The form of some contemporary toy accessories suggests that toy designers are aware of the functional difference between real acts and their ludic representation. BROUGÈRE (1993: 181) commenting on the realistic form of toy accessories designed for pretend baby care, points out some unrealistic combinations that are inconsistent with the real life model but are very functional during play, e.g., a doll's high chair, a toy cooker and a toy sink may be all part of the same compact structure (babies and sinks are not normally placed next to cookers...). The form of the toy is, thus, subsumed to its ludic function, a process which Brougère calls functional realism (*ibid*: 181).

⁴ Rules are understood here in terms of GARVEY's (1985: 577–578) specific strictures and normative guidelines based on concepts of what behaviour and attitudes are appropriate to a particular role and activity.

⁵ Phocaea is a rural community located 52 km SE of Athens, founded in 1928 by Greek refugees from Asia Minor. In the last thirty years, the community has experienced a series of changes the most important being demographic expansion, the development of a cash economy and the adoption of a modernist ideology permeating many aspects of Phocaeen life including attitudes towards children. (cf. GOUGOULIS 1992)

It is the consequences of these changes on the play of Phocaeen children (of the 6–12 year-old group) that I set out to study as part of my research for the degree of Ph. D. in Social Anthropology at University College London. My project was sponsored by the Peloponnesian Folklore Foundation.

CHILDREN'S LUDIC REPRESENTATIONS OF SCHOOL

A) POWER REVERSALS

Phocaean children often comment on their participation in a world where the existing power and authority structure of society is represented by adult figures (SCHWARTZMAN 1978: 126) by inverting during play the hierarchical position they occupy in real life. Power reversals are present in most play themes where children assume adult roles, however, they are especially prominent in play events dealing with children's own experience and structured in the form of asymmetrical dyads (Mum and child) or asymmetrical group relationships (teacher vs children).

"School" or "teachers", which is played in the streets and front yards of Phocaea⁶ by children of both sexes at least from the age of five through twelve, seems to be predominantly a girl's play theme in the sense that it is more likely to occur by female initiative.

In "school" play sessions children reproduce classroom situations commenting on the content of the educational curriculum, on the role of teachers as authority figures, on their own position as students in an educational system based on competition, discipline and learning by rote. Role and structural inversions (e. g. taking turns at the teacher role) characterize all enactments of "school". The content of the play events (e. g. whether mimicry or mockery prevails) seems to depend on the players' age, their number (solitary vs group pretense) and their implicit agreement on the role content and the behaviour patterns, which again presupposes a shared play experience.⁷ Thus, in solitary teacher play⁸ with imaginary students or in school sessions where dolls are allocated the students' role, girls portray the teacher as a "serious" figure testing students' competence by asking spelling and math questions, praising the correct answers and scolding the "students" who make mistakes. It seems, then, that in solitary play of girls up to nine years and in interactive play of children up to eight years school enactments revolve around the issue of control.

⁶ As an anthropologist, I employed the standard methods of participant observation and open-ended interviews, watching and playing with children in their school playground, their homes and their neighbourhoods during my one year stay in Phocaea. My status as an unmarried, childless female, during the period of my research made the children classify me as an honorary playmate, situated ambiguously between the categories of adult and child, a fact which facilitated my entrance into their secret world. My daily presence at school, on the other hand, helped me gain access to children's homes, as parents classified me as a something like a teacher.

⁷ Shared play experience is based on common cultural background and longitudinal participation in the same play group. Constitution of play groups in Phocaea is based mainly on kinship and residence patterns. Best friends are often first cousins, who also happen to live next door or in the same block, due to the local inheritance system.

Age and gender of the players may vary in different play categories or in different play settings. Symbolic play at home, when not played among siblings, is usually carried out by same sexed children. Street games usually involve players of mixed gender, aged between six and fourteen. Participation in games at school is marked more sharply by age and gender criteria.

⁸ My information on solitary play is based on observations of children during parallel play in the margins of group pretense, and open-ended interviews with children.

B) SCHOOL PARODIES

In play sessions, where children (girls or boys) over nine years of age, assume the students' role, school situations are reenacted only to be mocked.

There are many stereotypical elements in these mock versions of "teachers", in the sense that the content of the asymmetrical relationship between teachers and students is handed down by older children, a fact which possibly makes "school" the closest to rule games symbolic play activity.⁹ Two versions of this relationship are enacted most frequently: the *authoritarian teacher vs naughty students* and the *neutral teacher cum docile students vs the slow student*.

In the first case teachers are portrayed as extremely strict and abrupt, dispensing discipline and corporal punishment while the "students" deliberately give wrong or silly answers (e. g. $1+1 = 11$), tease each other, whisper and furtively play with toys whenever the "teachers" turns his/her back to write on the blackboard. Teasing is accepted as part of the play content, however, if it is stretched too far the session may be either called off, or transformed into something else, e. g. rough and tumble play or a chasing game. Boys particularly, enjoy the teasing part and stress disorder. In fact, when boys participate in "teachers", the play session has many chances to develop in some kind of tag with the girls in the chasing role.

In the second case teachers are rather benevolent figures, while the personality that appears to be mocked (even though criticism on the entire school situation may be present) is the slow student who cannot adapt to the school requirements. In fact the play theme among a group of girls, who lived and usually played in the SE part of the village known as Upper Neighbourhood, was called after the name of the student "Zourlokaterina" (crazy Catherine).

As put by 11-year-old Katina,¹⁰ one of the game's initiators, "Zourlokaterina" is a bandy-legged girl, who does everything wrong and is sent to her mother to find out how to do it right. Indeed in a play session which I videotaped, Zourlokaterina appeared not to know even the proper daily greeting and answered "Good evening" to the teachers's good morning greeting. She was subsequently sent to her "mother", who also gave wrong answers to make the situation appear more hilarious. The session took place on the pavement outside Katina's house at the presence of some adults who were laughing their hearts out throughout the play event. Similarly the "students" (played by Upper Neighbourhood boys who had just finished a war game) seemed to enjoy Zourlokaterina's wrong answers. They also added their own touch to the play theme. After having examined her docile "students" on math and history, Katina who was playing the teachers's part ran out of subjects and asked the boys to help her. "Come on, don't you have any ideas on what to do next?" Interestingly

⁹ SINGER and SINGER (1990: 244) have argued that children during middle childhood develop an interest in phantasy play in the form of theatrelike performances, that come closer to mimicking the logical properties of rule games. Their argument is based both on their own observations (1973: 18–20) and on the work of the OPIES (1984: 330–336), who list some stereotypical versions of English children's group pretending games, including "school".

¹⁰ Children's names are pseudonyms.

enough the "classes" the boys came up with were: Gymnastics, drawing and break which was voted for unanimously. Similarly, when the "teacher" finally expelled "Zourlo-katerina" for her goofy behaviour, a cause of all sorts of mishaps, the boys decided to punish their former school-mate by "beating up" both "Zourlokaterina" and her "mother". The play session ended in general turmoil.

Mockery may be addressed both at the teachers and the slow student during a playful portrayal of school. In a "school" session enacted by nine-year-old Stylianos and his seven-year-old brother Nasos, through animation of Playmobil figures, Lego bricks and other equipment, Stylianos played both the role of teacher and the role of students, while Nasos assumed the role of the boat owner who was to take the children home after school (the "school" was supposedly located at the sea-shore). Both brothers explicitly stated their identification with the particular roles assigned to Playmobil figures. Right from the beginning of the play session Stylianos assigned a "dupe" role to a Playmobil figure and presented him (all figures were male) as being in a state of confusion:

Teacher: Which subject do you want to start with my children?

Students: Math!

Teacher: Bravo! Hey you fool, (addressing a playmobil "student") what do you mean by "very well", you idiot? We are having a math class not English!

As Stylianos moved on to other classes, he continued in a similar fashion occasionally staging a mock caning of naughty students. The "teachers's anger" particularly escalated during the history class:

Teacher: Hey, you, "koutornithi" (i. e. twit, literally "dumb-bird")!

Koutornithi: Ds... Ds... (nonsensical sounds presumably uttered by the "student").

Teacher: Stop it! What was your father's name in the old days?

Koutornithi: Saravakos (famous Greek football player).

Teacher: That was his family name. What about his first name?

Koutornithi: Dimitris.

Teacher (angrily): So, Dimitris Saravakos was his name? (it becomes obvious that the "student" is actually referring to the football player) You will die! (typical threat among boys).

The "teacher" then caned the "student" in a mixture of angry shouts and laughter, at which point I interfered by asking Stylianos, if his real teacher actually practiced corporal punishment.

Cleo (laughing): Does your teacher bash you like that?

Stylianos: No.

Cleo: So, why do you cane the "student"?

Stylianos: I don't like them. (the "students")

Cleo: Why is that?

Stylianos (demolishing the "school"): I am going to change my job.

Cleo: What are you going to be?

Stylianos: A policeman (the playmobil figure representing the teacher was wearing traffic warden gear).

Cleo (insisting): Why was the “teacher” caning the “students”?

Stylianos: Because, whenever he turned his back to write on the blackboard they were very noisy.

A closer look at the content and structural features of mockery, which is the *leit-motif* of the last examples demonstrates some revealing regularities, which appear not only in Phocaeen children’s play but also in other recorded versions of playing schools:

The *stereotypical elements* in the described play events bear little on children’s “real” experience of school, a fact which also characterizes English versions of playing at school as reported by the OPIEs (1984: 333).

Similarly, HARDMAN (1974: 132) found that St Barnaba’s schoolchildren in Oxford, who were playing at teachers depicted a stereotype school built up by previous generations of players rather than the school of their own experience: teachers were enacted as stereotypes of authority, while pupils were stereotypically docile. Failure to conform to the docility rule was considered a serious breach of the etiquette calling for expulsion of the culprit from the play session.

The recurrence of *math* as a stereotypical school subject may be due to the fact that mistakes are obvious but may also portray children’s anxiety with the subject. Math is very unpopular among the majority of Phocaeen children, who often resort to private lessons to cope with the difficulties.

Errors are used alternatively to exhibit *defiant* behaviour (mockery aimed at teacher), which is punished, or *stupidity* calling for ridicule (mockery aimed at stupid school mate). In both cases we are dealing with symbolic inversion, as, in the first case, the teacher becomes the object of ridicule rather than a person to be respected and in the second case the fool/student becomes the main hero of the story. Wrong answers are themselves inversions of the correct replies and serve usually to invert the seriousness of the situation and cause laughter.¹¹ It is the entire school situation together with its participants that is mocked then, which reminds us of BAKHTIN’s analysis of the all inclusive, festive laughter (BAKHTIN 1968: 7) permeating folk humour, comedy and carnival.

As SUTTON-SMITH (1972) and TURNER (1974) have demonstrated, and as the discussed Phocaeen examples indicate, play constitutes a genre of symbolic inversion which has definite links to ritual, humour and drama. Let us now look closer at the characters of the ludic school parodies, in the light of this link.

The *stereotypical characters* appearing in the school versions depicted earlier have a strong resemblance to characters portrayed in jokes and stories. The “koutornithi” character, for example, in Stylianos’ school version is a hero in many jokes children read in books or learn from other children. “Zourlokaterina” is the

¹¹ A number of theorists have identified perceived incongruity as a necessary component of humour (ROTHBART 1973 in ALFORD 1981: 269). Wrong answers in that sense cause laughter because they violate a communicative expectancy.

name of a story of an anti-heroine, a typical fool-hero, whose stupidity leads after several mishaps to the accidental discovery of a treasure. The story also appears in its original version as a source for make-believe. The role content of the forementioned characters, however, is also closely related to characters featuring in the traditional Greek shadow theatre known as "Karaghiozis" (the protagonist of all stories).

"Karaghiozis", is a typical ambiguous comic hero, the "protagonist of a comic myth that combines the characteristics of a hero and a fool-hero" (KIOURTSAKIS 1985: 376). A lazy, ugly, hunch-backed joker proletarian, who strives to cope with the vicissitudes of life through his cunningness (ibid.: 317). KIOURTSAKIS (ibid.) adopting BAKHTIN's model describes the "Karaghiozis" as a comic convention originating from the carnivalesque tradition, degrading and inverting established values and common sense, personifying the bodily and morally inferior, while simultaneously endowing it with an ambivalent meaning. Many of Karaghiozis' puns are based on the same principle of incongruity present in children's mock versions of school, e. g. deliberate wrong answers or simple inversions of normal speech (KIOURTSAKIS 1985: 243–263).

Phocaeen children know "Karaghiozis" from television, from occasional professional shadow theatre performances in the village, organised by the community council and from comics. Furthermore children mentioned that they use shadow theatre puppets sold in local shops or construct their own puppets for their own spontaneous "Karaghiozis" performances, which are usually held during summer holidays in children's courtyards.

The recurrent theme of *corporal punishment* in "school" enactments does not directly bear on children's experience. Beating of children within the school or family environment is by and large an issue of the past in Phocaea. Caning however, is a typical motive in Greek shadow theatre performances (KIOURTSAKIS 1985: 265–273). Characters thrash each other on many occasions, while the character who receives most canings in Karaghiozis, himself, who is usually beaten up at the exposure of his trickery and ignorance after the undertaking of a task he cannot fulfill.

The meaning of the stereotypical beating up theme, must be sought, according to KIOURTSAKIS (ibid: 272) in the carnivalesque roots of Karaghiozis. Caning, as KIOURTSAKIS suggests, is an essential regulating force in Greek shadow theatre (and in European Comedia dell' arte, in the French puppet theatre "Guignol", etc.) and an integral part in the comic dramas still performed during carnival in rural parts of Greece. Ritual beating, is a typical motif of symbolic inversion, as it simultaneously degrades and glorifies, kills and resurrects its recipient and is symbolically associated with the central theme of all carnivalesque dramas: death and regeneration of nature.

Children's comic inversions as they appear in their stereotypical enactments of school, are based, in a similar fashion to comedy and carnival, on the motif of a reverted world where nothing remains in place. Everything is subject to derision including: normal speech, common experience and common sense.

CONCLUSION: PLAY AND SYMBOLIC INVERSION

What is it that children are getting at in their mock reconstructions of school? How effective can the criticism inherent in the ludic inversions of the school situation be?

There are two main streams in the interpretation of symbolic inversions as they appear in ritual, humour and play.

a) Symbolic reversals are cathartic (e. g. GLUCKMAN 1954; RADCLIFFE-BROWN 1940) phenomena reinforcing in effect the existing social order, their main function being to represent chaos and disorder thereby dramatizing the importance to return to social order.

b) According to supporters of the second stream, symbolic inversions are potentially subvertive, they are proto-structural phenomena (SUTTON-SMITH 1972: 18) i. e. latent systems of potential alternatives to the normative structure from which novelty will arise when contingencies in the normative system require it (ibid: 19). When, where and how the contingencies occur is a matter of debate (e. g. COHEN 1980; TURNER 1974: 61).

However, it is generally agreed that these contingencies do not usually come up in children's play. In most of the literature on children's play, satire is predominantly viewed as a safety valve, releasing the tension of the socialization process (KING 1987). Phocaeen children's disorderly portrayals of school primarily challenge the seriousness of the school situation in a way that usually is not tolerated in real life. Children's math errors, and derision of both teachers and schoolmates may seek to unmask seriousness and glorify the comic side of life, in an outbreak of festive laughter, whose features, as we have seen are borrowed from and structured by traditional humour genres. Indeed, the apparent disorder and burlesque in children's ludic reversals may be more orderly than they seem. SUTTON-SMITH and MAGEE (1989: 57) argue that it is erroneous to regard such play only as an example of behavioural reversibility, as a world upside down and speak of the existence of "orderly chaos".

Reality, fiction, ritual and drama structure this apparent chaos providing the implicit rule structure of the play event (e. g. the traits, and names, of the enacted characters, the form and content of their actions) and the yardstick to compare compatibility of actions and situations portrayed during play. Here I adopt BROUGÈRE's view of play as an act of cultural appropriation and a reworking of pre-existing schemes (BROUGÈRE-MANSON 1989-1990: 79). Children in that sense use the reality surrounding them and the imaginary "realities" presented in oral and written literature, drama and the media as a repository of scripts¹² for their imaginative play constructions.

¹² The term "script" is used by NELSON-SEIDMAN (1984) to analyse the organisation of children's shared phantasy world and their experiential representations. According to the authors, scripts are composed of a sequence of acts, organized around goals and specifying actor roles, props and scenes (1984: 47).

A contextualized discussion of these scripts, and an analysis of the process, regularities and hidden "rules" of pretenses, which this paper has sought to achieve, may be quite useful for the interpretation of children's ludic reversals. Play texts may be in that sense quite revealing about play contexts.

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