

Sophocles the Ironist

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Irony is generally regarded as one of the most distinctive and fundamental features of Sophoclean tragedy. The final page of R. P. Winnington-Ingram's book on Sophocles begins with the words 'Sophocles is recognized as the supreme ironist', and concludes 'Sophocles saw human life as tragic and ironical' (1980: 329). A full discussion of irony in Sophocles would be tantamount to a comprehensive interpretation of his plays, and the present chapter aims only to touch on some aspects of the subject.

The concept of 'dramatic', 'tragic', or 'Sophoclean' irony originated in Connop Thirlwall's essay 'On the Irony of Sophocles' (1833), although the term which he himself favoured was 'practical' irony. Thirlwall begins by distinguishing it from the familiar 'verbal' irony, which he defines as 'a figure which enables the speaker to convey his meaning with greater force by means of a contrast between his thought and his expression, or to speak more accurately, between the thought which he evidently designs to express, and that which his words properly signify' (Thirlwall 1833: 483). Thirlwall was familiar with the German philosophers of the early 19th C. who had greatly expanded the concept of irony beyond its traditional limits as a verbal strategy.¹ These philosophers included Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829), his brother August Wilhelm Schlegel (1767-1845), and Adam Müller (1779-1829). Irony was now taken to include a variety of contradictions, paradoxes, and incongruities which illustrate the failure of human beings to understand the true significance of situations in which they find themselves and the consequent possibility that their actions have very different consequences from those which they intended. A. W. Schlegel thus writes of Shakespeare's *Henry V*: 'After his renowned battles, Henry wished to secure his conquests by marriage with a French princess; all that has reference to this is intended for irony in the play. The fruit of this union, from which two nations promised to themselves such happiness in future, was the weak and feeble Henry VI, under whom everything was so miserably [end of p. 563] lost'.² Schlegel associated irony with comedy, and the concept of tragic irony seems to have been used for the first time by Adam Müller in 1806.³

There may previously have been no name for this kind of irony, although Aristotle's *peripeteia* (*Poetics* 1452a24) has some elements of it,⁴ but the concept itself goes back to Homer. For example, the seer Eurydamas does not foresee the fate of his two sons, who are killed by Diomedes (*Il.* 5.148-51).⁵ It might be expected that a seer can predict the future, yet (on the most plausible interpretation of the lines) he fails to foresee the fate of his own sons. This kind of irony corresponds to the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s definition 'A condition of affairs or events of a character opposite to what was, or might naturally be, expected; a contradictory outcome of events as if in mockery of the promise and fitness of things'. This is often termed 'situational' irony.⁶ A good example in Sophocles is the irony identified by Heracles towards the end of *Trachiniae* (1058-63):

¹ There is a useful brief account in Muecke 1982:18-27; cf. Muecke 1969: 159-215.

² Schlegel 1861: 432, cited by Muecke 1982:20.

³ Cf. Dane 1991: 122-6.

⁴ Cf. Muecke 1969: 47-8; 1982: 69.

⁵ Cf. G. A. Markantonatos 2009: 27-31.

⁶ For a discussion of situational irony from the perspective of experimental psychology, see Lucariello 1994.

The spearmen of the plain never did such a thing, nor the earth-born army of the Giants, nor the violence of the monsters, nor Greece, nor the barbarian lands, nor every country that I came to in my purifying work. But a woman, a female and unmanly in her nature, alone has brought me down, without a sword.

He does not, however, grasp the other great irony of the play, that his devoted wife Deianeira brought about his death in the attempt to keep his love.⁷

Thirlwall accepts that 'the contrast between man with his hopes, fears, wishes, and undertakings, and a dark, inflexible fate, affords abundant room for the exhibition of tragic irony', but he insists that 'Sophocles really aimed at something higher'.⁸ His concept of 'practical' irony develops from what he calls 'dialectic' irony, which is used, most notably by Socrates, as a systematic means of refuting an opponent's argument. This derives from the original Greek sense of *eironeia*, meaning understatement or dissimulation.⁹ [end of p. 564] Thirlwall's 'practical' irony is so called because it is 'independent of all forms of speech, and needs not the aid of words' (Thirlwall 1833: 485). The practical ironist may be malicious, encouraging someone under the mask of benevolence to engage in self-destructive behaviour, for example Timon and Alcibiades (Shakespeare, *Timon of Athens*), the witches and Macbeth (Shakespeare, *Macbeth*), and Mephistopheles and Faust (Goethe, *Faust*). 'But there is also a practical irony which is not inconsistent with the highest degree of wisdom and benevolence. A man of superior understanding may often find himself compelled to assent to propositions which he knows, though true in themselves, will lead to very erroneous inferences in the mind of the speaker, because either circumstances prevent him from subjoining proper limitations, or the person he is addressing is incapable of comprehending them' (Thirlwall 1833: 486). Thirlwall's example, the father of the prodigal son in the parable (Luke 15.11-32), suggests that his mind here is on the relationship between divine providence and human free will. He concludes the introductory section of his essay by expressing the view that Sophocles conceived destiny 'to be under the direction of a sovereign mind, acting according to the rules of unerring justice', with the result that 'though its proceedings might often be inscrutable to man, they would never be accidental or capricious' (Thirlwall 1833: 492).

Thirlwall believes that Oedipus is better off at the end of *Oedipus Tyrannus*: 'he appears chastened, sobered, humbled: the first and most painful step to true knowledge and inward peace, has been taken' (Thirlwall 1833: 500). His interpretation of *Trachiniae* depends on the audience always bearing in mind Heracles' future deification. Deianeira's attempt to keep his love has the opposite effect from that which she intended, but in the end her 'wishes have been fulfilled, not indeed in her own sense, but in an infinitely higher one' (Thirlwall 1833: 509). Thirlwall's interpretation of *Ajax* treats his madness as only the culmination of his lifelong pursuit of glory, and the rest of the play as a welcome growth of self-knowledge and self-control. He comments on 'the contrast between the appearance and the reality' (Thirlwall 1833: 524), but more specific point that 'out of his humiliation, his anguish, and despair, issues a higher degree of happiness and renown than he had ever hoped to attain' (Thirlwall 1833: 524-5). In *Antigone*, Thirlwall

⁷ Cf. Kirkwood 1958: 256; Winnington-Ingram 1980: 316-17, 329; Garvie 2005: 30.

⁸ Thirlwall 1833: 493. This is one of only two occurrences of the term 'tragic' irony in Thirlwall's essay, but it is clear from the other (535) that he regarded it as an appropriate term for the kind of irony which he has been discussing.

⁹ See Diggle 2004: 166-7 for a useful survey of the Greek word *eironeia* and its cognates.

considers ‘the balance held by an invisible hand, which so nicely adjusts the claims of the antagonists, that neither is wholly triumphant, nor absolutely defeated; each perhaps loses the object he aimed at, but in exchange gains something far beyond his hopes’ (Thirlwall 1833: 490). He comments on Antigone and Creon, ‘Each partially succeeds in the struggle, but perishes through the success itself: while their destruction [end of p. 565] preserves the sanctity of the principles for which they contend’ (Thirlwall 1833: 525). Thirlwall argues that Sophocles ‘preserves an ironical composure’ towards Philoctetes (Thirlwall 1833: 532), and sees merit in Odysseus’ commitment to the public good. Odysseus and Neoptolemus gain their ends in unexpected ways, and Philoctetes himself gains something greater than he originally envisaged. Thirlwall concludes that ‘the idea of a humbling and chastening Power, who extracts moral good out of physical evil, does not seem too refined for the age and country of Sophocles’ (Thirlwall 1833: 536).

Thirlwall’s view of practical irony thus develops logically from verbal irony by way of dialectic irony. Its most distinctive feature is that it is essentially benevolent. Human action in Sophocles may often be deluded and apparently destructive, but there is a higher power which, like Socrates in a Platonic dialogue, leads the actors to a better end. This is a challengingly optimistic reading of Sophocles, and contrasts sharply with some modern readings which suggest that irony points up only the futility of human ambition and intention. Winnington-Ingram, for example, writes, ‘This kind of irony can have no seat except in a flawed world ... Irony responds to disharmony and imperfections which it accepts for what they are, which it exploits and does not deny or explain away’ (1980: 329).¹⁰

The concept of dramatic irony which proved to be so influential is less important for Thirlwall than his idea of a providential divine power which, if it is to influence the course of events for the better, must also see a pattern in events which is hidden from the human participants.¹¹ This is common in *Odyssey*, especially when Odysseus returns in disguise to his homeland. W. B. Stanford cites passages such as 18.112-13, where one of the suitors wishes that the gods may grant Odysseus everything that he desires, suggesting that these touches of dramatic irony ‘serve to flatter the reader’s intelligence, to increase his feelings of pity, indignation, or anxiety, and to increase the suspense of waiting for the final dénouements’ [end of p. 566] (1964-5: ii. lviii). Muecke (1982: 14-15) cites a good example in the *Odyssey* of both verbal and situational irony in the comment by a suitor on the disguised Odysseus testing the bow: ‘“Ha! Quite the expert, with a critic’s eye for bows! No doubt he collects them at home or wants to make one, judging by the way he twists it about” ’ (21.397-400, tr. Rieu).

Thirlwall comments, in the case of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, on the ‘contrast between the real blindness and wretchedness of Oedipus and his fancied wisdom and greatness’ (Thirlwall 1833: 498), and how each step of the disclosure of the truth comes from incidents which either highlight or increase Oedipus’ confidence. In

¹⁰ Cf. Garvie 2005: 44: ‘The irony...springs from Sophocles’ deep conviction that human beings by their very nature are flawed and incapable of full understanding’. Lowe (1996: 524) argues that the concept of tragic irony derives from ‘the gap between individual and cosmic value’ in the *Iliad*, with its ‘bipartite cosmos, in which the individual mortal characters are framed in an immortal perspective where will, time, accident, and power are all illusory’.

¹¹ Muecke defines ‘dramatic’ irony as follows: ‘the irony of a character’s utterance having unawares a double reference: to the situation as it appears to him and, no less aptly, to the situation as it really is, the very different situation already revealed to the audience’ (1982: 29). Cf. Dane 1991: 129.

Electra, the return of Orestes gives a hidden meaning both to Electra's grief and to the confidence of the usurpers. 'Finally, it is in the moment of their highest exultation and confidence, that each of the offenders discovers the inevitable certainty of their impending ruin' (Thirlwall 1833: 504). The dramatist has a quasi-divine role as 'the creator of a little world' (Thirlwall 1833: 490), and the eye with which he views his creations 'will be that with which he imagines that the invisible power who orders the destiny of man might regard the world and its doings' (Thirlwall 1833: 491). He considers the ironic attention of a judge to two sincere but partial litigants. He goes on, however, to say that 'the irony lies not in the demeanor of the judge, but is deeply seated in the case itself' (Thirlwall 1833: 490). N. J. Lowe develops this idea, arguing against Vernant that irony rather than ambiguity is the appropriate term for such multiple and contrasting levels of significance in Greek tragedy, because 'it more readily allows that the structure of meaning may reside not just, or even primarily, in the word, but in the world' (1996: 528).¹²

Lewis Campbell objected that irony of the type identified by Thirlwall 'implies the absence or suppression of sympathy, and it cannot therefore be applied indiscriminately to every kind of dramatic contrast' (1879: 126). It may be an appropriate response to the suitors in the *Odyssey*, or to Aegisthus or Creon in Sophocles, but not to characters like Oedipus or Philoctetes for who we feel more deeply. He doubts whether the spectator of tragedy would 'mentally assume the position of a superior being, watching with tranquil interest the ignorance and vainglory of an ephemeral creature', [end of p. 567] but rather would feel pity and fear.¹³ Campbell undoubtedly identified an important feature of Thirlwall's definition of irony, namely its implication that the audience is comfortably superior to the characters in the drama, although he does not do justice to his concept of a providential divine force. Modern critics have also embraced the idea of the audience's superiority to the characters. Segal (1993: 85) defines dramatic irony as 'the discrepancy between the larger picture that we, the spectators, see and the small piece visible to the actor who is immersed in the stream of events'. Garvie (2005: 86) writes, 'The characters may think that everything is going well, but the audience, which, like the gods themselves, knows the truth, sees that they are moving ever closer to disaster'. He accepts the consequence, which so offended Campbell, that this makes the audience feel superior to the characters: 'While we identify largely with the characters, Sophoclean irony requires also that we remain to some extent detached' (2005: 45).

This is the nature of the irony in the earlier part of *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Oedipus replies to the Thebans' appeal for help in dealing with the plague, 'I know that you are all sick, and, sick as you are, none of you is as sick as I' (60-1). He means that he feels pain not just for himself but for the whole city, but the audience knows that he is cause of the plague.¹⁴ Creon mentions that Laius was the previous king and Oedipus replies, 'I know from hearsay, for I never saw him' (105). The audience knows that

¹² For an example of Vernant's appeal to ambiguity where earlier scholars might have found irony, see (e. g.) 'The equivocal character of Oedipus' words reflects the ambiguous status that the drama confers upon him and on which the entire tragedy rests ... The ambiguity of what he says does not reflect a duplicity in his character, which is perfectly consistent, but, more profoundly, the duality of his being' (Vernant 1988 [1972]: 116).

¹³ Campbell 1879: 130. On Campbell's protest against Thirlwall's use of the term irony, see Sedgewick 1935: 23; Kirkwood 1958: 262; Rosenmeyer 1996: 498.

¹⁴ Kirkwood 1958: 252 n. 11 observes that the ironic effect here depends on the audience's prior knowledge of the story.

Oedipus has indeed seen Laius, and that his relationship extends far beyond merely seeing him. Oedipus will pursue the murderer, 'For it will not be on behalf of a distant friend, but for my own sake, that I shall drive away this pollution' (137-41). The audience is led to feel that Oedipus begins as if he might continue '... but on behalf of a close one' (cf. 258-68).¹⁵ The verbal ironies are more pronounced in Oedipus' appeal to, and then curse upon, the unknown murderer (216-75). He says that he is 'a stranger to the story and a stranger to the deed' (219-20), before excommunicating the murderer:

But now, since I chance to hold the power which once he held, and to have a marriage and a wife in common with him, and since had he not been unfortunate in respect of issue our children would have had one mother—but as things are he has been struck down by fortune; on account of this I shall fight for him as though he had been my father' (258-65).

[end of p. 568] Oedipus tries to establish links to Laius, but they are closer than he thinks, and the meaning of their children having one mother is fundamentally changed by the fact that Laius's son was Oedipus himself. Notable as these ironies are, Kirkwood (1958: 253-4) reasonably points out that later dramatists elaborate the possibilities for verbal irony in the Oedipus story much more than Sophocles does, e.g. this passage from towards the end of Act I of *Oedipus* by Dryden and Lee (1678):

OEDIPUS: ... No pious son e'er lov'd his mother more
Than I my dear Jocasta.
JOCASTA: I love you too
The self-same way; and when you chid, methought
A mother's love start up in your defence,
And bade me not be angry: be not you;
For I love Laius still, as wives should love;
But you more tenderly, as part of me;
And when I have you in my arms, methinks
I lull my child asleep.¹⁶

These are ironies of the kind which Wayne C. Booth termed 'stable': 'the authors have offered us an unequivocal invitation to reconstruct, and the reconstructions have not themselves been later undermined'.¹⁷ His example is the first sentence of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*: 'It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife'. Author and reader stand together; neither is the victim of the irony. Booth contrasts this type of irony with 'unstable' irony 'in which the truth asserted or implied is that no stable reconstruction can be made out of the ruins revealed through the irony'.¹⁸

The irony in the second half of Oedipus Tyrannus is more of the unstable type, especially when it derives from the disparity between human and divine knowledge. Any comfortable sense on the part of the audience that it knows the truth is gradually undermined, for example by the following (906-28):

CHORUS: ... For already the oracles of Laius are fading and are being expunged, and nowhere is Apollo manifest in honour; but the power of the gods is perishing.

¹⁵ For more examples, see Stanford 1939: 163-73; G. A. Markantonatos 2009: 105-25.

¹⁶ For discussion of Dryden and Lee's *Oedipus*, see Macintosh 2009: 57-64.

¹⁷ Booth 1974: 233.

¹⁸ Booth 1974: 240.

Enter IOKASTE, carrying offerings which she will present to the statue of Apollo which is on the stage. [end of p. 569]

IOKASTE: Lords of the land, the thought has come to me to go to the temples of the gods, bearing in my hands these garlands and this incense. For Oedipus is exciting his mind in excess with every kind of grief, and he is not interpreting new happenings by means of earlier ones like a rational man, but he is at the mercy of the speaker, if he speaks of terrors. So since I do no good by trying to counsel him, I come as a suppliant to you, Lycian Apollo, since you are our neighbour, with these accompaniments of prayer, that you may provide us with some cleansing solution. For now we are all afraid, when we see him, the captain of our ship, struck powerless.

Enter MESSENGER.

MESSENGER: Might I learn from you, strangers, where is the house of King Oedipus? But best of all, tell me if you know where he is!

CHORUS: This is his dwelling, and he himself is in it, stranger, and this lady is his wife and the mother of his children.

There is stable irony here, in that the audience knows that the oracles were veridical and that Oedipus' anxieties are rational. There is also less stable irony. It has often been observed that the arrival of the messenger seems to be an answer to Jocasta's prayer, initially bringing reassurance with his news that Polybus is dead but soon precipitating the final revelation as it emerges that Polybus was not Oedipus' father after all.¹⁹ On the other hand, this irony is not immediately apparent to the audience, and even when it does become apparent we understand no better than the characters the implications of the fact that the arrival of the messenger at this point is an answer to Jocasta's prayer.

The Messenger's three lines, quoted above, end *mathoim' hopou* ('learn where'), *Oidipou* ('of Oedipus'), and *katisth' hopou* ('know where'). Bernard Knox writes: 'These violent puns, suggesting a fantastic conjugation of a verb "to know where" [in Greek, *oida pou*] formed from the name of the hero who, as Tiresias told him, does not know where he is—this is the ironic laughter of the gods'.²⁰ The audience is no position to share this laughter, or to feel that we can understand what Oedipus does not.

Finally, at the end of the passage quoted above, the effect of the chorus's reply in Greek could be conveyed (as Kirkwood suggests) by a dash: 'this lady is his wife and mother—of his children'.²¹ This is weirder than any [end of p. 570] of the ironies in Oedipus' words in the first half of the play, as it has no meaning which can be explained in human terms. John Gould writes that, Sophocles' irony 'is practised upon ourselves as audience as much as upon the characters of the play. For the play encourages us constantly to make connections and to draw out implications that in the end we are forced to reassess, to question, and perhaps abandon'.²²

The opening scene of *Ajax* is an apparently straightforward example of dramatic irony, with Ajax ignorant of the truth of which the audience is aware. This is illustrated by the following extract (91-100):

¹⁹ See (e. g.) Kitto 1966: 139-40; Winnington-Ingram 1980: 182; Gould 1988: 246.

²⁰ Knox 1957: 184; cf. Vernant 1988 [1972]: 124; Segal 1981: 223.

²¹ Kirkwood 252-3; cf. Stanford 1939: 171; G. A. Markantonatos 2009: 119. The ambiguity is remarked upon by the scholiast, although only as something which 'pleases' the listener.

²² Gould 1988: 246. On the role of Apollo in the play, see further Budelmann 2000: 171-5; Lloyd 2005: 111.

AJAX: Hail, Athena! hail, daughter of Zeus! How loyally have you stood by me! Yes, I shall honour you with golden offerings from my booty to thank you for this catch.
 ATHENA: I thank you; but tell me this, have you well stained your sword in the blood of the Argive army?
 AJAX: I have a right to boast, and I shall not deny it!
 ATHENA: Did you arm your hand against the sons of Atreus too?
 AJAX: So that never again shall they refuse honour to Ajax.
 ATHENA: The men are dead, if I understand your words.
 AJAX: Let them try to deprive me of my arms, now that they are dead!

He wrongly believes that Athena is his ally (90, 92, 117), although he earlier angered her by rejecting her help (774-5) and she is now in the process of destroying him. He shows equal misunderstanding of Odysseus, and commentators point to the irony that he eventually owes his rehabilitation to the man he regarded as his greatest enemy.²³ Ajax may be the victim of irony here, but he is also an ironist himself. The irony in the last line here (100) is of a typically Sophoclean kind. Jebb compares *OT* 1274-5 where Oedipus says of his blinded eyes 'in future they should see in darkness those they never should have seen', i. e. not see them at all; *OC* 1377, where Oedipus curses his sons 'so that you two may learn respect for your begetters', i. e. kill each other; *Ant.* 310-11, where Creon threatens the guards with execution 'so that for the future you may know where you can get your profit when you plunder'; *Trach.* 1110-11, where Heracles threatens to Deianeira 'so that she may be taught to proclaim to all that both in life and death I have punished evildoers!', i. e. by her death.²⁴ Ajax resembles Creon and [end of p. 571] Heracles in these passages, as well as the suitors in the passages from the *Odyssey* quoted above, in employing irony when he is himself a victim of it.

The interesting discussion of this scene by N. J. Lowe points out that a crudely bipolar definition of dramatic irony is inadequate here, as Ajax is observed not only by the audience, but also by Athena and Odysseus.²⁵ Each of the four (audience, god, intelligent mortal, madman) has a different understanding of every statement. Some accounts of dramatic irony align the vision of the audience with that of the gods, but in *Ajax* these two levels of understanding soon begin to diverge. Athena's vision is incomplete, because she sees only a great man brought low by his lack of *sophrosyne* (the 'pietist' aspect of the play), and never shows any awareness of Ajax's undoubted greatness (the 'hero worshipper' aspect of the play). Irene de Jong expresses this in terms of narratology: 'her divine focalization, though omniscient and coming early in the play, is not the dominant one'.²⁶ De Jong argues, however, that there is an authoritative view of Ajax, even if it is not that of Athena: 'it is apparently the humanistic perspective of Odysseus, expressed early and adhered to consistently until the end of the play, which Sophocles wants his spectators to adopt'.²⁷ Odysseus does indeed recognize that Ajax 'was the most valiant man among the Argives, of all that came to Troy, except Achilles' (1340-1), and that it would therefore violate the laws of the gods to leave his corpse unburied. He also expresses a sensible view of the instability of human prosperity, which leads him to pity Ajax's misfortune because he sees its relevance to himself (121-6). This is indeed admirable, but Odysseus does not have access to the Ajax which the audience sees in the middle part of the play, and his

²³ Cf. Kirkwood 1958: 255-6; Stanford 1963: 182-3 (note on 955), 186-7 (note on 988-9); Winnington-Ingram 1980: 58; Garvie 1998: 160 (note on 364-7), 247-8 (note on 1374-5), 248 (note on 1382).

²⁴ Jebb 1896: 26, note on line 100.

²⁵ Lowe 1996: 526-31.

²⁶ De Jong 2006: 93; cf. Budelmann 2000: 184-5.

²⁷ De Jong 2006: 93.

understanding must therefore remain incomplete. Furthermore, the way in which the play develops shows that not even the audience enjoys ‘that sense of control which ... is the peculiar pleasure of the stage’.²⁸

The other notable ironic scene in *Ajax* is Ajax’s ‘deception speech’ (646-92). His argument stresses the unpredictability and mutability of the world, in which nothing is too hard or strong to change or yield to something else. The speech contains some statements of mutability which are undeniably true, for example: [end of p. 572]

Why, the most formidable and the most powerful of things bow to office; winter’s snowy storms make way before summer with its fruits, and night’s dread circle moves aside for day drawn by white horses to make her lights blaze; and the blast of fearful winds lulls to rest the groaning sea, and all-powerful Sleep releases those whom he has bound, nor does he hold his prisoners forever (669-76).

On the other hand, Ajax also chooses examples such as the impermanence of an oath (649) or of friendship (678-83) which are more obviously ironical because of their violation of the Gricean maxim of quality (e.g. ‘I have lately learned that our enemy must be hated as one who will sometime become a friend’, 679-80).²⁹

Ajax’s statements of intent are also expressed in ironical terms, especially the following (666-7):

Therefore for the future we shall learn to yield to the gods, and we shall learn to reverence the sons of Atreus.

Commentators remark on the violation of Grice’s maxim of quantity in the exaggerated use of ‘reverence’ here. He could conceivably state without irony that he will reverence the gods and yield to the sons of Atreus, but not that he will reverence his bitterest human enemies.³⁰ Jebb, however, argues that, ‘If his profession of “yielding to the gods” were ironical, his real meaning must be that he defies them: he would be a Capaneus, a Mezentius’.³¹

This brief survey of the ‘deception speech’ makes clear that it cannot usefully be interpreted in terms of the traditional definition of verbal irony as ‘a figure of speech in which the intended meaning is the opposite of that expressed by the words used’ (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Ajax does not mean that day does not follow night or that no one wakes from sleep, and Jebb seems to be right that he can hardly be expressing the intention of defying the gods and blaspheming against the sons of Atreus. It would indeed hardly exhaust the ironical meaning of ‘It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife’ to reduce it to a statement that this proposition is not universally acknowledged. Modern ironologists have demonstrated the inadequacy of the traditional interpretation, and advanced a variety of competing theories. An example is [end of p. 573] Wilson and Sperber’s ‘echoic mention’ theory: ‘The speaker echoes a thought she attributes to someone else, while dissociating herself from it with anything from

²⁸ Sedgewick 1935: 55.

²⁹ Cf. Grice 1975.

³⁰ The inversion of terms was noted already by the scholiast. Cf. Winnington-Ingram 1980: 49: ‘If there is anything in the speech which betrays its “insincerity”, it is this choice of words’; Heath 1987: 187.

³¹ Jebb 1896: xxxvi, referring to two extreme blasphemers.

mild ridicule to savage scorn'.³² The theory does not require the thought actually to have been expressed in a particular form of words by a specific person, but it needs in some sense to be available as a possible relevant utterance. There are various reasons why the speaker may dissociate herself from it, not only (as in the traditional definition of irony) because she believes it to be false. The force of Ajax's irony derives from the eloquence of his statement of the view of the world from which he dissociates himself. This brings us close to the classic interpretation of the speech by Karl Reinhardt: 'the deception grows from an irony which has deeper roots than what we generally call "tragic irony"; here the irony arises from a dawning perception of an everlasting discord between the hero and the way in which the world is organised'.³³

Ajax thus employs verbal irony in a far more profound way in this speech than in his earlier jibe against the sons of Atreus (100). It was argued above that neither Athena nor Odysseus has an adequate understanding of him, and the obscurity of this speech means that the audience is no longer in a position to feel any comfortable sense of control.³⁴ Discussions of the speech often argue that 'the attentive spectator' (or the like) will realise that Ajax intends to kill himself, but there still are many ways in which it remains puzzling even when studied in full knowledge of what happens later in the play. The immediate response of the chorus is to sing a joyful ode (693-718), which concludes: 'All things are withered by mighty time; and I would say that nothing was unpredictable, now that Ajax, beyond our hopes, has repented of his anger against the sons of Atreus and his great quarrel!'. This is one of four choral odes in Sophocles' extant plays (the others are *Trach.* 633-62, *Ant.* 1115-54, and *OT* 1086-1109) which express excitement and joy immediately before the tragic outcome is confirmed. A. F. Garvie writes perceptively: 'The beauty of the language communicates the chorus's joy to the audience ... But the audience does not really share the chorus's delusion, or, at the very least, it is uneasy'.³⁵ The emotional force of the chorus's words would have been reinforced by music and dance, with the result that it [end of p. 574] seems difficult for the audience to appreciate the undoubted irony of the situation in any detached way.³⁶

The ironies in *Electra* operate on several different levels. Orestes' return in the opening scene makes clear to the audience that Electra's behaviour is based on false premises until line 1227, Clytemnestra's until line 1404, and Aegisthus' until line 1475. There are some straightforward examples of stable irony, whereby the audience knows the truth which is hidden from the characters, for example the dialogue which follows the Old Slave's false report of the death of Orestes (783-96):

CLYTEMNESTRA: ... But now—for on this day I have been freed from the fear inspired by this woman here and him—yes, she was a worse mischief, living with me and all the time sucking my very life-blood—now we shall spend our days, I think, securely, for any threats of hers.

ELECTRA: Ah, miserable me! Now I can lament your disaster, Orestes, when in this plight you are insulted by this mother of yours! Am I not well off?

CLYTEMNESTRA: Not so; but as he is he is well off.

³² Sperber/Wilson 1992: 60 = 2007: 41. For a critique of the echoic mention theory, see Attardo 2001.

³³ Reinhardt 1979 [1947]: 25; cf. Winnington-Ingram 1980: 54; Garvie 1998: 186.

³⁴ E. g. Hesk 2003: 85: 'The ambiguous form of Ajax's language makes it very hard for us to pin down his attitude to mutability'.

³⁵ Garvie 1998: 192.

³⁶ Contrast Griffith 1999: 314: 'the Chorus have shown themselves fairly normal and reasonable people, yet their inability to recognize what we see staring us in the face starkly underlines the weakness of merely human intellects and endeavours'.

ELECTRA: Hear this, Nemesis, of the one who lately died!
 CLYTEMNESTRA: Nemesis has heard what she needed to hear and has decided well.
 ELECTRA: Insult me! Now is your moment of good fortune.
 CLYTEMNESTRA: Then will not Orestes and you put a stop to this?
 ELECTRA: We have been stopped, far from our stopping you!

Clytemnestra thinks that she has been freed from fear (783), but the apparent good news is part of a plot which will bring about her death. Her ironically understated ‘I think’ (786) points the irony at her own expense (cf. *Aj.* 100, discussed above), as does her sarcastic echoing of Electra’s words (790-3). She thinks that Electra is the ‘worse mischief’ (784), but it is Orestes who will kill her. Orestes is ‘well off’ (791), but not in the way Clytemnestra thinks. She says that Nemesis (goddess of retribution) ‘has heard what she needed to hear and has decided well’, but it is she rather than Orestes who will be punished. Clytemnestra’s ironic question ‘Then will not Orestes and you put a stop to this?’ (795) will in fact be answered in the affirmative.³⁷

Electra herself is the ironist in her exchange with Aegisthus after the death of Clytemnestra and shortly before he himself will be killed (1450-7): [end of p. 575]

AEGISTHUS: Then where are the strangers? Tell me!
 ELECTRA: Inside; they have found a kindly hostess.
 AEGISTHUS: Did they in truth announce that he was dead?
 ELECTRA: No, they even proved it, not by word only.
 AEGISTHUS: So can we even see with our own eyes?
 ELECTRA: We can, and it is a most unenviable sight.
 AEGISTHUS: Your words have given me much pleasure, not a usual thing.
 ELECTRA: You may feel pleasure, if this truly pleases you.

The word translated ‘found’ (1451) can also suggest the meaning ‘accomplished the murder of’ (cf. *E. Or.* 89). The line translated ‘No, they even proved it, not by word only’ could also mean ‘No, they even showed him to us (sc. alive)’. In the last line of the passage (1457), ‘if’ for Aegisthus means ‘because’, but Electra knows that the sight will not in fact please him. The scene proceeds with him eagerly uncovering the corpse which he believes to be that of Orestes but is in fact Clytemnestra’s.

Lewis Campbell thought that Sophocles may encourage the spectator to be ironical towards Aegisthus, but that Electra was one of the characters towards whom ‘he makes us feel too deeply to leave any room for irony’ (1879: 127). It would perhaps be more accurate to say that deep feeling and irony are combined in our response to Electra. Her lamentation in the earlier part of the play is powerfully involving, although we already know that Orestes has returned and that her sufferings will soon be over. Electra is as deceived about her true situation as are Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, for example when she laments Orestes after he has returned alive and pours scorn of Chrysothemis for correctly reporting that he has done so. There are doubts about the reliability of her view of Agamemnon in her debate with Clytemnestra, where she seems determined to justify his behaviour at all costs. Her belief after the Paedagogus’ messenger speech that Orestes is dead means that her behaviour for the next 450 lines is founded on delusion. This sequence includes her rejection of Chrysothemis’ announcement that Orestes has returned, her plan to kill Aegisthus, and her lament over the urn. The lament is one of the most powerful and subjectively intense speeches in all Greek tragedy, but the urn is empty and the living Orestes is standing beside her. Her heroism and grief are now purely subjective, and not rooted in the understanding of her situation which she had earlier. Sophocles

³⁷ For discussion of this scene, see Sedgewick 1935: 34-7; Finglass 2007: 336-7.

draws the audience into identifying with her emotions, while at the same time distancing us from them.³⁸ [end of p. 576]

Finally, there is the question of the 'ironic' interpretation of the play as a whole. Scholars who accept an 'affirmative' interpretation of the play argue that Sophocles, unlike Aeschylus or Euripides, presents the matricide as being unequivocally just. It is an argument in favour of this view that Orestes and Electra have no doubts about the justice of the revenge either before or after the murders, and that both Chrysothemis and the chorus are generally in agreement with them about it. The possibility that the matricide may be problematic is not considered by anyone. The gods take a similar attitude. Apollo has ordered the revenge, and there are at least hints that other gods support it. Electra's prayers (110-20, 1376-83) seem to be answered, while Clytemnestra's prayer (634-59) is not. The Furies do not appear at the end, and there is no explicit indication that Orestes will be pursued by them. Supporters of the affirmative interpretation argue that there is a significant difference between the kind of irony which is proposed by the ironic interpretation of *Electra* and that which is generally associated with Sophocles. P.T. Stevens, for example, writes, 'elsewhere in Sophocles at any rate such irony is an incidental contribution to the total effect and never contradicts the natural impression of the play as a whole' (1978: 112). This may apply to the stable ironies of Electra's scenes with Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, but we have seen that Sophocles also employs less stable ironies which are not resolved in any straightforward way.³⁹

Irony may be less pervasive in *Antigone*, *Philoctetes*, and *Oedipus at Colonus* than in the other four extant plays, although there is still much that could be discussed.⁴⁰ This chapter has tried above all to show that Sophocles may exploit relatively 'stable' irony, where the audience is confidently aware of truth hidden from the characters, but that he also uses more complex and 'unstable' irony which unsettles any feelings of certainty which we may have about the real meaning of events.

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³⁸ Cf. Lloyd 2005: 77-97.

³⁹ See Lloyd 2005: 99-115.

⁴⁰ On irony in *Antigone*, see Griffith 1999: 20-1.

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