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ON THE MAIN TYPES OF DRAMATIC IRONY AS USED IN GREEK TRAGEDY

Modern discussions have tended to emphasize four main species of irony : Socratic or dialectical irony ; rhetorical or verbal irony ; tragic or dramatic irony ; irony of Fate. This dinstinction is clearly shown in Chambers' Twentieth Century Dictionary, which gives [1] the following comprehensive definitions of these types of irony :

1. The Socratic method of discussion by professing ignorance.
2. Conveyance of meaning (generally satirical) by words whose literal meaning is the opposite.
3. A situation or utterance (as in a tragedy) that has a significance unperceived at the time, or by the person involved.
4. A condition in which one seems to be mocked by fate or the facts.

As (1) is Socratic irony, (2) is rhetorical irony and (4) is irony of Fate in the widest of senses, we may concentrate on (3) as *being dramatic or tragic irony.*

Although it is almost impossible to make distinctions of species of dramatic irony that hold absolutety - since different varieties shade off into one another - for the sake of definiteness, and relying on Chambers' formula as stated above, we can recognize two basic types of dramatic irony in Greek tragedy :

I. The irony of one type, which is e x p l i c i t, might be called 'ORACULAR', since its effect lies mainly in o r a c u l a r, that is, in ambiguous or suggestive language.

The 'oracular' irony may be :

(a) either CONSCIOUS, when a character deliberately uses language suggesting double meanings to the audience, and sometimes to some of the listeners on the stage or on the orchestra.

(b) or UNCONSCIOUS, when a character unwittingly uses ambiguous words bearing to the audience and occasionally to some other aware characters or the chorus, in addition to their natural meaning, a further and ominous sense, hidden from the speaker himself and referring frequently to his own inevitable fate.

II. The irony of the other type, which is i m p l i c i t, might be called 'SITUATIONAL', since its effect depends on s i t u a t i o n rather than on ambiguous or suggestive words. The 'situational' dramatic irony is always unconscious.

But the above definition of the 'situational' dramatic irony «a situation..... that has a significance unperceived at the time, or by the person involved» (Chambers 3a) seems to me too wide and should be reduced, since every such situation is not tragic irony.

We think it should be limited to a situation that has a significance unrelised at the time by person(s) involved *but leading to tragic and fatal consequences for such person or persons.*

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1. Chambers' Twentieth Century Dictionary, ed. W. Geddie, (rev. ed.), London, (impr. 1968), p. 561.

Although we have thus narrowed down very substantially Chambers' formula of dramatic irony, it becomes obvious that we will still be able to embrace within our definition of tragic irony many passages, where the effect does not depend on ambiguous utterance at all but on SITUATION itself.

Now if one wanted to describe the different kinds of situations to which one could apply the term tragic or dramatic irony, it would be almost imposible.

However in most cases of this type of irony a character reveals an *obvious failure to comprehend a situation of which the audience have full understanding*. That is, in this case the character acts in such a way that those who know the true state of things see an 'ironical contrast' between what this character thinks he is accomplishing and what he actually is accomplishing.

There are other cases where the character's b l i n d n e s s takes *the special form of c o n f i d e n c e before a disaster which the audience know is threatening*. That is, in this case the effect of irony lies chiefly in a conflict of present confidence with future outcome, etc.

Let us now illustrate the above statements :

I. In cases of 'oracular irony', language put into the mouth of the speaker is i r o n i c, if it also reminds the audience of the truth.

(a) Thus, in the oracular irony of c o n s c i o u s type, its effect is usually expressed in language that is :

1. True, but not true in the sense understood by the victim of irony.

When, for instance, Clytaemestra charges the herald to tell his master to hurry about returning home where he will find a wife :

ἐσθλὴν ἐκείνῳ πολεμίαν τοῖς δύσφροσιν (Agam. 608)

her utterance is true but not in the sense feld by the herald -whatever the Argive elders may think. The audience know that Clytaemestra is indeed ἐσθλή «faithful» (cf. Soph. El. 24), however not to Agamemnon but to her paramour, and πολεμία not to their enemies but to her husband. It is not difficult to imagine here a swift glance by the speaker towards the palace making Aegisthus ἐκείνῳ and Agamemnon one of her δύσφρονες.

Besides, when young Neoptolemus says, in a moment, to Philoctetes:

μόνον θεοὶ σώζοιεν ἔκ τε τῆσδε γῆς
ἡμᾶς ὅποι τ' ἐνθένδε βουλοίμεσθα πλεῖν (Phil. 528—9)

that is, «may the gods take us safely from this land to wheresoever we wish to sail», Philoctetes thinks that Neoptolemus means «to home», whereas the audience know that he means «to Troy».

Finally when Electra says to her mother, while the latter is entering the cottage to perform a pious task as she supposes :

θύσεις γὰρ οἷα χρή σε δαίμοσιν θύειν (Eur. Electra 1141)

it is of course true that a sacrifice is going to take place within Electra's hut but not in the sense understood by the Queen, since in this θυσία Clytaemestra will not be «sacrificer» but victim.

2. True in two senses, but only one of them is understood by the victim of irony.

When, for example, Clytaemestra turns to her handmaidens (Agam. 908 ff.) and orders them to strew the ground with purple tapestries for Agamemnon's passing :

ἐς δῶμ' ἄελπτον ὡς ἂν ἡγῆται Δίκη (Agam. 911)

her utterance is true here in two senses but only one of them is felt by the king : in fact, the innocent meaning of δῶμ' ἄελπτον as it is understood by Agamemnon is «into the house he never hoped to see» (cf. Eur. Suppl. 784), but Clytaemestra shares with the audience a second sinister meaning, namely δῶμ' Ἀΐδαο (cf. Iliad XXIII. 74 and Odyssey XI. 571); an audience well versed in Homer would be used to the association of the word δῶμα with Ἀΐδαο, as an ominous periphrasis for Hell, or indeed an alternative sinister meaning 'a palace where Clytaemestra and Aegisthus were waiting to kill him'.

Likewise when Electra tells Aegisthus that the 'Phocian strangers' φίλης ... προξένου κατήνυσαν (Soph. El. 1451), her utterance is true in two senses, but only one of them is felt by Aegisthus ; that is, φίλης...προξένου κατήνυσαν means to Aegisthus «they have reached the home of a kind hostess» (cf. Herod. VI. 140), but to the spectators «they have accomplished the murder (cf. Eur. El. 1164) of this kind hostess» (cf. the schol., ad loc.).

Finally when the disguised Dionysus says to Pentheus :

κρύψῃ σὺ κρύψιν ἥν σε κρυφθῆναι χρεὼν (Bacchae 955)

his words are true in two senses, though Pentheus understands only one of them. In fact, this phrase suggests to the king that Dionysus will secure for him a safe 'hidding place' so as to be unseen by the Maenads, but for the audience it has an ominous significance concerning Pentheus' imminent doom. In particular, the use of the word κρύπτω and its derivative κρύψις reminds the audience of the ominous meaning of 'bury', since κρύπτω in tragic poetry is often employed in such a sense.

It should be noted here that it is not always possible to distinguish between the cases I (a) 1 and I (a) 2.

The dramatic effect of the ambiguous language in these and in many similar examples is, I think, partly to *make us feel the full pathos involved in the situation of the deceived man*, by reminding us that he is being deceived.

But there is something else too. The speaker in these cases is not himself the victim of any illusion, but foresees the calamity that is about to fall on others, and exults in the prospect. Thus, his ambiguous utterances reach the spectator's ears as a *d a r k h u m o u r* at the expense of the victim, which adds to the *horror of the situation.*

(b) In the case of 'oracular irony' of unconscious type, a character uses *language with two sets of meanings one of which expresses the reality, the other his own mistaken reading of it.*

While this type of irony can hardly be found in Aeschylus, it is used frequently, and with splendid effect by his successors, particularly by Sophocles; and, undoubtedly, this is the more emotional and the more impressive of the previous type, because the sufferer is here the speaker himself : entirely blind as to the disaster which overhangs his head, he is continually letting fall words ominously appropriate to his own condition. Thus, Fate or the gods are portrayed

as exercising a perverse and witty humour at the exspense of the speaker, the tone of whose utterances contrasts with the bitterness of his imminent doom.

Thus, when Oedipus says, in the presence of Creon and the Theban elders, that he wants to find and punish Laius' murderer :

ὑπὲρ γὰρ οὐχὶ τῶν ἀπωτέρω φίλων
ἀλλ' αὐτὸς αὑτοῦ τοῦτ' ἀποσκεδῶ μύσος (O T 137—8)

he cannot suspect that his words are truer than he knows. Irony lies here in the following dreadful ambiguities : the word οὐχὶ can go syntactically either before ἀπωτέρω «not for the sake of my distant connections» (I shall drive away this polution) as Oedipus wants to say, or before the prep. ὑπέρ «for the sake of m y n o t distant connections» (my own father). As R. C. Jebb here observes «the reference to Laius is confirmed by κείνῳ προσαρκῶν in 144», ad loc. The word αὑτοῦ -going syntactically with the prep. ὑπέρ -is also placed in such a position that it can equally well be taken as possesive gen. to μύσος and mean «I will dispell m y o w n taint» (cf. also the schol. on 137 : τὴν ἀλήθειαν αἰνίττεται τῷ θεάτρῳ ὅτι αὐτὸς δράσας τὸν φόνον ὁ Οἰδίπους καὶ αὐτὸν τιμωρήσεται). Oedipus is of course quite unaware that his mere protestation of devotion to his subjects is, in reality, the literal truth, and that his utterances refer by a cruel joke of Fate to his own condition.

Similar instances occur often in Sophocles, as we shall see later.

But now I shall present two examples from Euripides in order to show that, what has been called 'Sophoclean irony', might equally well have got its name from him. I take these passages from the Bacchae :

In an exchange between Dionysus and Pentheus, the king of Thebes, after a lock of his πλόκαμος being out of place was set straight by disguised God, Pentheus says to Dionysus :

ἰδού, σὺ κόσμει· σοὶ γὰρ ἀνακείμεσθα δή. (934)

The tragic irony of this line resides in the word ἀνακείμεσθα, which is intended to be ominously ambiguous ; thus, while the phrase σοὶ γὰρ ἀνακείμεσθα means to Pentheus «now I depend on your will» (cf. Aristoph. Birds 638 ἐπί σοι . . ἀνάκειμαι), to the audience it has quite another ring : «now I am d e d i c a t e d to you» (cf. Dodd, ad loc.) as naturally this verb means, especially in the inscriptions ; and Pentheus is truly led δίκην σφαγίου by Dionysus to be sacrificed in . . . . glory of his worship.

Let us also have a look at a breath-taking exchange between Dionysus and Pentheus, where Dionysus' ambiguous promises make the king -unable to understand the god's d a r k h u m o u r - utter some words filled with irony.

Πε . . . μόνος γὰρ αὐτῶν εἰμ' ἀνὴρ τολμῶν τόδε.
Δι . μόνος σὺ πόλεως τῆσδε ὑπερκάμνεις, μόνος·
τοιγὰρ σ' ἀγῶνες ἀναμένουσιν οὓς ἐχρῆν.
ἔπου δέ· πομπὸς (δ') εἶμ' ἐγὼ σωτήριος,
κεῖθεν δ' ἀπάξει σ' ἄλλος. Πε . ἡ τετεκοῦσά γε.
Δι . ἐπίσημον ὄντα πᾶσιν. Πε . ἐπὶ τόδ' ἔρχομαι.
Δι . φερόμενος ἥξεις . . . Πε . ἁβρότητ' ἐμὴν λέγεις.
Δι . ἐν χερσὶ μητρός. Πε . καὶ τρυφᾶν μ' ἀναγκάσεις.
Δι . τρυφάς γε τοιάσδε. Πε . ἀξίων μὲν ἅπτομαι (962—70)

Here is a dialogue of nine lines based on ambiguty -such as is never found in so concentrated a form in Sophocles. Dionysus keeps telling Pentheus the

plain truth about his fate, but his phrases are vague enough to allow the other to read his own expectations into them. The king answers in words which unconsciously complete Dionysus' ominous predictions, especially in 966, 967 and 970.

I note some dreadful ambiguities which give rise to moving effects of irony: the wordes μόνος γὰρ αὐτῶν εἰμ' ἀνὴρ τολμῶν τόδε (962) mean to Pentheus «for I, alone, a m a m a n e n o u g h to dare this deed» but to the spectators suggest «I am the only man who is led in woman's cloths to ridiculing and ruin!»; similarly the phrase ἥ τεκουσά γε (ἀπάξει με) means to the king «my mother will lead me in my return home», but to the audience «my mother will carry my mangled body (or head) to Thebes». Also Pentheus' utterance ἐπὶ τόδ' ἔρχομαι, ἀβρότητ' ἐμὴν λέγεις (967, 968) and τρυφᾶν μ' ἀναγκάσεις (969) are intended to be ambiguous. These phrases, while they mean to the speaker «it is for that I am going» (i.e. for a triumphant return), «you propose to p a m p e r me» and «you have decided actually to s p o i l me», in the ears of the spectators have quite another ring: «I am going in order to become a horrible sight in my return for all my countrymen», «you intend to maltreat me» and «you have decided to destroy me». Finally Pentheus' last words in this passage are an unconscious self-condemnation - ἀξίων μὲν ἅπτομαι (970), the tragic irony of which makes the audience shudder [1].

II. In the instances of 'situational' irony the effect depends, as has been already said, on situation rather than on double-edged or suggestive words.

(a) In most cases of this type of irony, the effect lies chiefly in a c o n t r a s t between what a charecter understands about his condition or acts and what the reality demonstrates about them. As we shall see in the following examples, the malignant and perverse humour shown by Fate or the gods is, in these cases also, traceable. The aware audience can perceive its awful presence behind the ironical conflict of the carefree unawareness of the victim and the dark shadows which gradually surround him.

Thus, we see such a type of irony in Clytaemestra's eagerness to give hospitality to ... the Phocian strangers -not suspecting the presence of her son and avenger:

> ἄγετ' αὐτὸν εἰς ἀνδρῶνας εὐξένους δόμων,
> ὀπισθόπους τε τούσδε καὶ ξυνεμπόρους·
> κἀκεῖ κυρούντων δώμασιν τὰ πρόσφορα. Choeph. 712—14)

Likewise in Ajax's answer to Athena about Odysseus' fate:

> ἥδιστος, ὦ δέσποινα, δεσμώτης ἔσω
> θακεῖ· θανεῖν γὰρ αὐτὸν οὔ τί πω θέλω (Ajax 105—106)

This passage shows indeed the nature and degree of Ajax's blindness. It is a madness which makes him live among phantoms in an insane, illusory world.

Moreover when Oedipus says to his wife:

> φεῦ φεῦ, τί δῆτ' ἄν, ὦ γύναι, σκοποῖτό τις
> τὴν Πυθόμαντιν ἑστίαν, ἢ τοὺς ἄνω
> κλάζοντας ὄρνεις, ὧν ὑφηγητῶν ἐγὼ
> κτενεῖν ἔμελλον πατέρα τὸν ἐμόν; (O T 964—7)

he reveals a terrible failure even to suspect the horrible significance of Apollo's oracle. To the aware spectators -who, foreseeing that within a few short hours

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1. It is worth saying here that the above scene combines the conscious irony of Dionysus with the unconscious irony of Pentheus.

the power of the wrath of heaven will have crushed him, can perceive the awful-game of Fate -Oedipus' spectacle at this moment appears filled with thrilling irony.

There is also 'situational frony' in Agave's question to her father:

τί δ' οὐ καλῶς τῶνδ' ἢ τί λυπηρῶς ἔχει; (Bachae 1263)

when Cadmus referred to ἄλγος δεινόν (1260) she is going to feel, soon after her disillusionment.

(b) In other cases of the 'situational irony' the character's blindness takes the special form of confidence before a calamity which the spectators know is approaching.

When for example Agamemnon replies to the Argive elders in a self-satisfied manner:

εἰδὼς λέγοιμ' ἂν· εὖ γὰρ ἐξεπίσταμαι
ὁμιλίας κάτοπτρον, εἴδωλον σκιᾶς,
δοκοῦντας εἶναι κάρτα πρευμενεῖς ἐμοί (Agam. 838—40)

his self-confidence that he is speaking with knowledge gained from experience is in contrast with the real situation, since he will discover the real value of his «knowledge» especially about the identity of his «sincere friends» only at the moment when he cries «Ah, I am striken a deadly blow» (cf. 1343). He believes that experiences (cf. his reference to Odysseus 841—4) has made him confident of his ability to know the true minds of his associates; of course, he has learned that things and persons are frequently not as they appear, but unfortunately for him he is unable yet to suspect the true mind of his wife! Fate has already started to play her cruel joke upon him.

Moreover when Philoctetes rejoices at the prospect of sailing home, he says impetuously:

ἀεὶ καλὸς πλοῦς ἔσθ', ὅταν φεύγῃς κακά (Phil. 641)

«It is ever fair failing wheen you flee from evil». He little knows the sort of sailing expedition on which he is destined to go, and how the supposed evil, which he believes confindently he is to escape, itself lies...in that expedition! However he is confident he will return home.

There is also 'situational irony' in Polymestor's order to his attendants:

χωρεῖτ'· ἐν ἀσφαλεῖ γὰρ ἥδ' ἐρημία (Hecuba 981),

since he confidently believes he is safe, while moving to his ruin.

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ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΙΣ

Ἡ «δραματικὴ εἰρωνεία» ἀπαντᾷ εἰς τὴν Ἀττικὴν τραγῳδίαν ὑπὸ δύο βασικοὺς τύπους: Εἰς τὸν πρῶτον, τὸ εἰρωνικὸν στοιχεῖον στηρίζεται εἰς διφορουμένας κατὰ τὴν σημασίαν λέξεις καὶ φράσεις, αἱ ὁποῖαι εἴτε χρησιμοποιοῦνται σκοπίμως ὑπὸ τοῦ ἐπὶ σκηνῆς ἥρωος εἰς βάρος ἄλλου χαρακτῆρος, εἴτε προφέρονται ἀσυνειδήτως ὑπ' αὐτοῦ καὶ προαναφέρουν τὴν ἐπερχομένην καταστροφὴν τοῦ ἰδίου τοῦ ἑαυτοῦ του· εἰς τὸν δεύτερον τύπον, τὸ εἰρωνικὸν στοιχεῖον ἐξαρτᾶται μᾶλλον ἀπὸ τὴν ὅλην δραματικὴν κατάστασιν παρὰ ἀπὸ φραστικὰ δεδομένα. Εἰς αὐτὴν τὴν περίπτωσιν οἱ θεαταὶ βλέπουν συνήθως τὸν ἥρωα νὰ δρᾷ κατὰ τοιοῦτον τρόπον, ὥστε νὰ ἐπιταχύνῃ ἀνεπιγνώστως τὴν ἔλευσιν τῆς συμφορᾶς του.