

METra 1

Epica e tragedia greca: una mappatura

a cura di Andrea Rodighiero, Giacomo Scavello, Anna Maganuco

Irony and the Limits of Knowledge in Homer and Sophocles

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Abstract This article examines dramatic irony in Homer and Sophocles, focusing on the *Odyssey*, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, and *Ajax*. It argues that dramatic irony, which exploits differing levels of knowledge between characters and audiences, is closely linked to conceptions of humans and gods and the gap between mortal and divine cognition. In both Homer and Sophocles, irony is a key conduit through which such theological and epistemological ideas are articulated and communicated. The article identifies significant continuities between the use of dramatic irony in Homer and Sophocles, implying a shared intellectual background, despite some differences.

Keywords Irony. Homer. Sophocles. Human. Divine.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Homer. – 3 Sophocles. – 4 Conclusion.



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199

1 Introduction

In an article published in 1833, the scholar and Anglican bishop C. Thirlwall declares – rather startlingly, from a modern perspective – that some of his readers «may be a little surprised to see *irony* attributed to a tragic poet».¹ Thirlwall then puts forward an interpretation of ‘practical’, ‘dramatic’, or ‘Sophoclean’ irony that builds on the traditional concept of irony as dissimulation or understatement (εἰρωνεία)² to create a broader phenomenon encompassing both dramatic and theological dimensions. In Thirlwall’s conception, the dramatist becomes akin both to the ironist who dissimulates the truth from her victim, and to a providential god whose inscrutable plan remains hidden to ignorant mortals until its fulfilment.³ Sophocles, for Thirlwall, is «the creator of a little world, in which he rules with absolute sway, and may shape the destinies of the imaginary beings to whom he gives life and breath according to any plan that he may choose».⁴ Dramatic irony occurs when Sophocles keeps this plan hidden from his characters, only revealing it to them gradually, while the audience know the truth all along. A gap in knowledge thus opens up, allowing the dramatist to stage a process of progressive enlightenment which, for Thirlwall, ultimately demonstrates the beneficent effects of divine intervention in human life.

Scholars often note that Thirlwall’s article, and the Idealist thinkers who influenced him, inaugurated a long tradition of reading drama, and particularly Greek tragedy, ironically.⁵ His concept of Sophoclean irony has, with various modifications, evolved into a mainstay of tragic criticism, so much so that M. Lloyd could recently claim – in

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1 Thirlwall 1833, 483.

2 The precise meaning and implications of εἰρωνεία are still debated, particularly as they relate to ‘Socratic irony’. For an overview, see Diggle 2004, 166-7; on Socratic irony more specifically, see the brief discussion of Muecke 1982, 15-16 and, in more detail, Vlastos 1991, 21-40, Edmunds 2004, Lane 2006 and 2011, Wolfsdorf 2007 (from different sides of the debate).

3 See Stanford 1939, 67: in cases of dramatic irony, «the author is being ironical by proxy».

4 Thirlwall 1833, 494.

5 For discussions of Thirlwall’s concept of Sophoclean irony and its genesis, context, and influence, see Muecke 1982, 27-9; Lloyd 2012, 564-8; Goldhill 2012, 252-6; Ossa-Richardson 2019, 333-41. As these scholars note, particularly influential Idealist conceptions of irony can be found in the works of the Schlegel brothers, Solger, Hegel, and (a few years after Thirlwall) Kierkegaard.

a fitting reversal of Thirlwall's opening sentence in 1833 – that «a full discussion of irony in Sophocles would be tantamount to a comprehensive interpretation of his plays».⁶ Yet one aspect of Thirlwall's concept has been largely rejected or neglected: its theological dimension. Probably because of its excessively moralising and Christianising tenor, Thirlwall's theological reading of Sophoclean irony has not found favour.⁷ Instead, scholars are usually content to note that a particular text or passage is an instance of dramatic or tragic irony (labels which in themselves do not tell us very much); or, at best, to treat it as a literary device designed to heighten the impact of a scene and shape the audience's emotional involvement. This is certainly an important aspect of dramatic irony (as ancient scholarship seems to have recognised).⁸ Yet I would like to suggest that this emotional dimension is intimately connected to, even dependent upon, theological and philosophical considerations that are essential to the way dramatic irony works. In order to do so, I attempt to probe, and modify, Thirlwall's insight that dramatic irony effectively blends narrative structure and theology. In contrast to Thirlwall, however, I propose to focus on a few examples from Homer as well as on Sophocles. Partly building on the work of scholars such as R. Rutherford and N. Lowe, I argue that Homeric epic and Sophoclean tragedy use dramatic irony in very similar ways, and that this deployment of irony presupposes, and instantiates, a shared intellectual and religious background.⁹ As we shall see, however, they also approach, and build on, this shared background differently, for reasons that have to do both with genre and with intellectual divergences. In this way, my chapter seeks to shed light on the broader question of the relationship between epic and tragedy, particularly in terms of the two genres' depiction of the relation between human and divine.

⁶ Lloyd 2012, 564.

⁷ As Lloyd 2012, 566 puts it, Thirlwall's is a «challengingly optimistic» reading of Sophocles.

⁸ Insofar as it recognises the phenomenon of dramatic irony. The *scholia* to *Oedipus Tyrannus* in particular regularly note instances of unintentional ambiguity on Oedipus' part (thus coming close to the modern concept of dramatic irony) and comment on their emotional effect on audiences: see for instance *schol. ad Ai.* 301a, 687; *schol. ad OT* 34, 137, 141, 236, 251 with Stanford 1939, 23-4 and Nünlist 2009, 234-5; and fn. 41 below. The same can also be said of Homer, as noted by Duckworth 1931, 336 and Muecke 1982, 140-1; see 141: «ancient audiences were aware of the effects of dramatic irony, even though they did not have a term with which to label it».

⁹ Rutherford 1982; Lowe 1996; see also Rutherford 2012, 326-9. Thirlwall, in his article, draws a stark contrast between the fifth-century context from which he believes Sophoclean irony arose and the «simple theology of the Homeric age» (1833, 495-6). He thus frames his interpretation of Sophocles in a developmental model of Greek intellectual culture which postulates a linear progression from a «primitive» archaic age to the «enlightenment» of the classical period. This kind of approach, which has remained popular, is convincingly rejected in Cairns 2013a following Williams 1993, among others.

My argument starts from two observations. First, and most obviously, dramatic irony is all about knowledge. As Thirlwall showed, it exploits the various gaps in knowledge between three main individuals or groups: (i) the author, dramatist, or narrator, (ii) the audience, and (iii) the characters operating within the narrative frame. Because each of these groups possesses differing degrees of access to, or awareness of, the reality or true situation of the narrative, a single phrase or action, intended by the speaker or agent to convey a particular meaning or achieve a particular aim, can acquire other, different meanings for different audiences.¹⁰ Second, this epistemological dimension of dramatic irony is, in an essential sense, theological, since it has to do with the relationship between human and divine. As I shall argue, dramatic irony in Homer and in Sophocles hinges on what Rutherford calls a «hierarchy of knowledge»¹¹ that corresponds to conceptions of humans, gods, and the relationship between them. The main idea I am driving towards is that dramatic irony in Homer and Sophocles not only has its roots in early Greek ideas of human and divine; but it is also an important vector through which these ideas are articulated, communicated, and problematised.¹²

I begin by examining some examples of the specific forms dramatic irony takes in Homer, with the aim of bringing out some of the similarities and differences with Sophocles. As we shall see, there are both clear continuities and differences in Homer's and Sophocles' deployment of irony and in the philosophical and theological frameworks in which it operates.

2 Homer

Book 21 of the *Odyssey* narrates the archery contest announced by Penelope at 19.572-81. At 21.152-6, after his unsuccessful attempt to string Odysseus' bow, the suitor Leiodes utters the following words:

ὦ φίλοι, οὐ μὲν ἐγὼ τανύω, λαβέτω δὲ καὶ ἄλλος.
πολλοὺς γὰρ τόδε τόξον ἀριστήας κεκαθήσει
θυμοῦ καὶ ψυχῆς, ἐπεὶ ἦ πολὺ φέρτερόν ἐστι

¹⁰ For definitions and taxonomies of dramatic irony after Thirlwall, see for instance Stanford 1939, 66-8; Kirkwood 1958, 247-51; Paduano 1983; Rosenmeyer 1996 («blind irony» and/or «structural irony»); Jouanna 2010, 469-91 («ironie tragique involontaire»); Lloyd 2012, 564; Rutherford 2012, 323-6. On the history of the term and its relationship with ambiguity, see Ossa-Richardson 2019, 326-63.

¹¹ Rutherford 2012, 325. See also Lowe 1996, 524.

¹² In this sense, my article (and the broader project of which it is a part: see Johnston, forthcoming) attempts to situate Homeric and Sophoclean irony within what Tor calls early Greek «theological epistemology» (Tor 2017, 337-9).

τεθνάμεν ἢ ζῶοντας ἀμαρτεῖν, οὐ θ' ἔνεκ' αἰεὶ
ἐνθάδ' ὀμιλέομεν, ποτιδέγμενοι ἥματα πάντα. 155

Friends, it is not I that shall string it; let another take it. For many princes shall this bow rob of spirit and of life, since truly it is better far to die than to live on and fail at that for the sake of which we continue to gather here, waiting expectantly day after day.¹³

Leiodes remarks that Odysseus' bow will kill many of his fellow suitors, in the figurative (or ironic) sense that since they will be unable to string it and thereby win the contest and Penelope's hand, they will 'die' of shame or grief.¹⁴ Leiodes does not realise that his words quite literally predict the suitors' imminent slaughter, in which Odysseus' bow will play a prominent role. The dramatic irony here depends entirely on the epistemic contrast between the suitors, who do not realise that they are about to die, and the narrator and audience – as well as certain characters, divine and human, within the narrative – who are aware of that fact. This contrast is established early on in the poem, notably through a number of passages in which a god, a seer, or the narrator foreshadows or foretells the destruction of the suitors. Thus, for instance, at 2.283-4 Athena tells Telemachus that the foolish suitors «do not know death and black doom, which is almost upon them, and will destroy them all in one day» (οὐδέ τι ἴσασιν θάνατον καὶ κῆρα μέλαιναν, | ὅς δὴ σφιν σχεδόν ἐστιν, ἐπ' ἥματι πάντας ὀλέσθαι).¹⁵ Closer to our passage, the suitors' demise has been foreshadowed by Penelope's dream at 19.535-58, by Theoclymenus' prophecy at 20.350-7, and finally by the narrator, who anticipates the outcome of the archery contest before it occurs by saying that the bow and axes will serve as “material for the contest and the beginning of the slaughter” (ἀέθλια καὶ φόνου ἀρχήν, 21.4, cf. 24.169).¹⁶

Having established this epistemic asymmetry and regularly emphasising it, the *Odyssey* narrator is able to put the suitors in situations which expose their ignorance of their fate, and to exploit the ambiguous potentialities of language to allude to their forthcoming slaughter. Thus our passage at 21.152-6 blends an irony deriving from

13 Translation: Murray/Dimock.

14 de Jong 2001, 512-13. Loney 2019, 125 fn. 6 argues that Leiodes' remark should be taken as «an ironic – perhaps knowingly ironic on his part – statement of the so-called heroic code: it is better to die in the attempt than to live on having failed to woo [Penelope]».

15 Other such passages include 1.255-6, 265-70 (Athena); 2.146-76 (Halitherses); 13.394-6 (Athena). See Duckworth 1933, 55-6.

16 Translation: de Jong. As she notes (2001, 505), the scholiast interprets these words as coming from the poet himself; I have followed this interpretation.

the dramatic situation itself – Leiodes does not know that he is about to be killed alongside the other suitors – with an ambiguity revolving around the figurative and literal meanings of death. Similar instances of irony and ambiguity include 18.99-100, a passage in which the narrator tells how the suitors “died of laughter” (γέλω ἔκθανον) as they watched the fight between the disguised Odysseus and the beggar Irus. On the surface, and adopting the limited perspective of the suitors, this expression is innocuous: it seems to have a similar meaning to its modern English or Italian equivalent.¹⁷ Yet an ironic meaning lurks underneath it from the better-informed perspective of the audience: the suitors will literally die; and their demise may in a sense be associated with excessive laughter, if one takes this as symbolic of their folly and blindness.¹⁸ The ominous undertones of these lines are intensified, as D. Steiner notes, by the «increasingly sinister» presentation of the suitors’ laughter as their end draws near.¹⁹

There is also arguably, in 21.152-6 and 18.99-100, a further dimension to dramatic irony and ambiguity. The two passages are odd. The slightly contrived, partly echoic, metaphorical character of the ambiguity creates a semantic or linguistic strain on the words deployed by the poet and spoken by the characters within the narrative.²⁰ Antinous almost seems to pick up on this when he rebukes Leiodes and repeats his words (21.168-71):

Λειῶδες, ποῖόν σε ἔπος φύγεν ἕρκος ὀδόντων,
 δεινόν τ’ ἀργαλέον τε – νεμεσῶμαι δέ τ’ ἀκούων –
 εἰ δὴ τοῦτό γε τόξον ἀριστήης κεκαθήσει 170
 θυμοῦ καὶ ψυχῆς, ἐπεὶ οὐ δύνασαι σὺ τανύσαι.

Leiodes, what a word has escaped the barrier of your teeth, a dread word and grievous! I am angered to hear it, if indeed this bow is to rob princes of spirit and life because you are not able to string it.²¹

¹⁷ See for instance Russo, Fernández-Galiano, Heubeck 1992, 53.

¹⁸ Levine 1982, 203: the expression is «a précis of the suitors’ role in the *Odyssey*; they die as a result of the witlessness implied by their laughter, their blindness to the drama played out before them and their inability to see its relevance to their own situation».

¹⁹ Steiner 2010, 71. On the motif of the suitors’ laughter, see 161-2 and Rutherford 1992, 232; see also below.

²⁰ As Loney 2019, 125 notes, Leiodes’ train of thought at 21.152-62 is «somewhat difficult to follow». Commentators have also noted the strangeness of 18.99-100: for example, Russo, Fernández-Galiano, Heubeck 1992, 53 remark on the «oddly parodic way» in which the metaphor «anticipates the literal death of the suitors». I am grateful to Gregory Hutchinson for getting me to think about this aspect of ambiguity and irony.

²¹ Translation: Murray/Dimock.

Antinous' focus on the process of Leiodes' words leaving his mouth, and his description of them as δεινόν τ' ἀργαλέον τε, terrible, strange, and troublesome, grievous – an expression elsewhere only used of dangerous, uncanny, monstrous things –²² intensify the sense of strangeness and foreboding. Perhaps the slightly strained, odd character of Leiodes' speech is a mark of supernatural interference: Leiodes is introduced as an augur (21.145), and we may imagine a god momentarily taking possession of him so that he speaks prophetically, without realising the import of his words.²³ Something similar arguably occurs when the suitors are said to “die of laughter” at 18.99-100. As I have noted above, the suitors' laughter in the run-up to their slaughter acquires sinister undertones. The most striking instance of this comes at 20.345-58, when Athena arouses the suitors' “unquenchable laughter” and “leads their minds astray” (μνηστήρσι δὲ Παλλὰς Ἀθήνη | ἄβριστον γέλω ὤρσε, παρέπλαγξεν δὲ νοήμα, 345-6); there follows a series of horrific visions: the meat on the tables is stained with blood (anticipating Antinous' blood spilling on the food, 22.20-1), the suitors' eyes fill with tears, their hearts want to lament (348-9). Most notably, the poet tells how the suitors “laughed with the jaws of others” (οἱ δ' ἤδη γναθμοῖσι γελοίων ἀλλοτρίοισιν, 347), quite clearly suggesting some kind of supernatural possession. The narrative voice then gives way to a prophetic outburst by the seer Theoclymenus, vividly foreshadowing the slaughter and the ghostly suitors rushing to the underworld (350-7, cf. 24.1-14), to which they respond with another burst of laughter (358).²⁴ As W. Stanford puts it, in this passage, and therefore also perhaps in 18.99-100, irony and ambiguity are interwoven with «a feeling of demonic power lurking somewhere in the background [...] which helps to change ambiguity's force from that of a clever verbal trick to something akin to solemn oracular communication».²⁵

As they listen to these episodes, the poem's audience know that the suitors' language and behaviour is based on a radically limited understanding of reality, partly conditioned and compounded by divine interference. Audience members thus find themselves in a position of superior knowledge, from which they can observe the limits and vulnerability of human cognition and language, enacted here by the suitors within the world created by the narrator. What is the ef-

22 The sea (5.175-6), a great wave sent by Poseidon (5.365-7), and the monstrous Scylla (12.119).

23 See Stanford 1948, 362: «Leodes speaks in prophecy, but does not realize its full import». The potential significance of Leiodes' status as seer in this passage is also noted by Dekker 1965, 263.

24 On this scene, see further Rutherford 1992, 231-3; Loney 2019, 32-4.

25 Stanford 1939, 110; see further 111-12.

fect, and purpose, of the dramatic irony? It is easy to imagine that some will have enjoyed the irony of the despicable suitors' dying of hysterical laughter at the very man who is about to bring about their deserved suffering, or of one suitor unwittingly alluding to the forthcoming slaughter of the group. Yet some audience members would also realise that their own position of epistemic superiority is only temporary and artificially created by the narrative, and that limited knowledge and vulnerability is, in fact, something that they share with all humans, including the suitors. In this sense, part of the effect of the dramatic irony deployed by the *Odyssey* poet is to complicate what H. Lloyd-Jones called the «comparative moral simplicity»²⁶ of the narrative of Odysseus' revenge. Dramatic irony generates a heightened sense that the suitors, for all their faults and egregious behaviour, are human beings whose delusion merely intensifies a naturally faulty perception of reality, which makes them vulnerable to the movements of a world they cannot fully understand. This sense of vulnerability is reinforced by the fact that the gods, whether or not we choose to see them as sometimes actively interfering with the suitors' speech, constantly intervene to push the suitors deeper into arrogance and delusion (see for instance 18.346-8, 20.284-6, 20.345-6); and, eventually, by the ruthless and indiscriminate nature of a massacre in which no-one – not even the 'good' suitors Amphinomus and Leiodes – is spared.²⁷

The dramatic irony punctuating the narrative of the suitors' demise thus has clear theological implications, which are partly spelled out in Odysseus' long speech to the suitor Amphinomus in Book 18 (18.125-50). The most significant part of the speech for our purposes comes at 130-7:

οὐδὲν ἀκιδνότερον γαῖα τρέφει ἀνθρώποιο,	130
πάντων ὅσα τε γαῖαν ἔπι πνεῖει τε καὶ ἔρπει.	
οὐ μὲν γάρ ποτέ φησι κακὸν πείσασθαι ὀπίσσω,	
ὄφρ' ἀρετὴν παρέχωσι θεοὶ καὶ γούνατ' ὀρώρη-	
ἄλλ' ὅτε δὴ καὶ λυγρὰ θεοὶ μάκαρες τελέσωσι,	
καὶ τὰ φέρει ἀεκαζόμενος τετληότι θυμῷ·	135
τοῖος γὰρ νόος ἐστὶν ἐπιχθονίων ἀνθρώπων	
οἷον ἐπ' ἡμᾶρ ἄγησι πατὴρ ἀνδρῶν τε θεῶν τε.	

The earth breeds nothing weaker than human beings, of all the things on earth that breathe and move. For they think they will never suffer evil in the future, so long as the gods give them pros-

²⁶ Lloyd-Jones 1971, 31.

²⁷ For a more detailed analysis of the killing of the suitors along similar lines, see Allan 2006, 23-5. See also Loney 2019, 119-70.

perity and their knees are quick; but when the blessed gods bring evil to pass, these things too humans bear against their will with a patient heart. For such is the mind of earth-dwelling humans, as is the day which the father of men and gods sends upon them.²⁸

Odysseus offers a general, broadly applicable view of human existence. The life of mortals is defined, in implicit contrast to that of the gods, by physical and cognitive weakness. Humans' minds are such that they cannot predict what lies beyond their immediate experience; as a result, they are particularly vulnerable to vicissitude and the reversals sent by the gods. In the second half of the speech, Odysseus applies this conception first to his own example (137-40) and then, significantly, to that of the suitors (141-50), remarking in both cases on the wisdom of avoiding deeds of folly (ἀτάσθαλα, 139, 143). In this way, the suitors' transgression and punishment are explicitly located in a context of shared human vulnerability. Amphinomus takes Odysseus' warning to heart (18.153-4); yet the narrator, in a clear demonstration of the validity of Odysseus' view of humankind, comments that the suitor will be powerless to escape his death, which is foreordained by Athena (18.155-6). We might therefore see Amphinomus as a paradigm of human vulnerability, a fact which allows the audience to view his downfall in the light of the gap between mortals and gods.

The *Iliad* deploys dramatic irony in similar ways. Partly through foretelling, foreshadowing, and other narratorial comments, the poet generates multiple situations in which characters operating within the narrative speak or act in ignorance of the full meaning of their words or actions, which is at least partially available to the audience.²⁹ One particularly striking and complex example comes at the beginning of Book 2. Responding to Thetis' demand that the Greeks should pay for dishonouring Achilles, Zeus sends a "destructive dream" (οὐλον ὄνειρον, 2.5) to Agamemnon to deceive him into thinking that the time has come for the Greeks to capture Troy. Agamemnon wakes up delighted, not realising that Zeus is simply planning to send more sufferings onto the Greeks, as the narrator makes clear to the audience (2.35-40).³⁰ In a further twist, Agamemnon de-

²⁸ Translation: Murray/Dimock (modified).

²⁹ On foreshadowing in the *Iliad*, see for instance Duckworth 1933; Edwards 1991, 7-10.

³⁰ Agamemnon is left «pondering in his heart on things that were not to come to pass. For he really believed that he should take the city of Priam on that very day - fool that he was! - and he did not know what deeds Zeus was planning; for he was yet to bring woes and groanings on Trojans and Danaans in mighty combats» (τὸν δ' ἔλιπε' αὐτοῦ | τὰ φρονέοντ' ἀνὰ θυμὸν ἅ ρ' οὐ τελέεσθαι ἔμελλον· | φῆ γὰρ ὁ γ' αἰρήσειν Πριάμου πόλιν ἥματι κείνῳ, | νήπιος, οὐδὲ τὰ ἦδη ἅ ρα Ζεὺς μῆδετο ἔργα· | θήσειν γὰρ ἔτ' ἔμελλεν ἐπ'

cides to test his troops' resolve by pretending that he has decided they should leave Troy and return home. He announces his "clever plan" (πυκινὴν ... βουλήν, 2.55) at 2.110-22, in a speech that is a fascinating case of what one might call 'double irony':

ὦ φίλοι, ἦρωες Δαναοί, θεράποντες Ἄρης,
 Ζεὺς με μέγας Κρονίδης ἄτη ἐνέδησε βαρείη,
 σχέτλιος, ὃς πρὶν μὲν μοι ὑπέσχετο καὶ κατένευσεν
 Ἴλιον ἐκπέρσαντ' εὐτείχεον ἀπονέεσθαι,
 νῦν δὲ κακὴν ἀπάτην βουλευόσατο, καὶ με κελεύει
 δυσκλέα Ἄργος ἰκέσθαι, ἐπεὶ πολὺν ὤλεσα λαόν.
 οὕτω που Διὶ μέλλει ὑπερμενέει φίλον εἶναι,
 ὃς δὴ πολλῶν πολίων κατέλυσε κάρηνα
 ἠδ' ἔτι καὶ λύσει· τοῦ γὰρ κράτος ἐστὶ μέγιστον.
 αἰσχρὸν γὰρ τόδε γ' ἐστὶ καὶ ἐσσομένοισι πυθέσθαι,
 μὰς οὕτω τοιόνδε τοσόνδε τε λαὸν Ἀχαιῶν
 ἄπρηκτον πόλεμον πολεμίζειν ἠδὲ μάχεσθαι
 ἀνδράσι παυροτέροισι, τέλος δ' οὐ πῶ τι πέφανται.

My friends, Danaan warriors, attendants of Ares, great Zeus, son of Cronos, has ensnared me in grievous *atē* - harsh god, since at one time he promised me, and bowed his head to it, that only after sacking well-walled Ilios would I return home; but now he has planned cruel deceit, and tells me to return inglorious to Argos, when I have lost many men. Such, I suppose, must be the pleasure of Zeus, supreme in might, who has laid low the towers of many cities, and will lay low still more, for his power is very great. A shameful thing it is even for men in times to come to hear, that so noble and so great an army of the Achaeans so vainly warred a fruitless war, and fought with men fewer than they, and no end to it has yet been seen.³¹

Believing himself to be in a position of superior knowledge, Agamemnon constructs a fictional situation in which he has changed his mind about the war because he has realised that he was a victim of a cruel deception sent by Zeus. Yet, as the audience know, Agamemnon is in fact a victim of *atē*, and Zeus has in fact devised an "evil deception" (κακὴν ἀπάτην, 114); and it is only later, once he has seen the consequences of his folly, that Agamemnon will realise this - it is striking that parts of the Book 2 speech are repeated almost *verbatim* in 9.17-28, with Agamemnon «now proposing in earnest what he had pre-

ἄλγεά τε στοναχάς τε | Τρωσὶ τε καὶ Δαναοῖσι διὰ κρατερὰς ὑσμίνας, translation: Murray/Wyatt). Cf. also 2.419-20.

³¹ Translation: Murray/Wyatt, modified.

viously proposed in deceit». ³² As D. Cairns puts: «in the grip of *atē*, Agamemnon ironically represents himself as in the grip of *atē*». ³³ Like Zeus, Agamemnon assumes the role of the master manipulator; yet his plan – unlike Zeus’ – is based on a false understanding of reality. To the audience, who have been informed of that reality and can see through the dense layers of divine deception and human ignorance, Agamemnon’s speech adopts meanings beyond or against what he intends. He is exposed as a weak, short-sighted, and foolish mortal, easily deceived by Zeus into bringing about even more death and destruction than he already has. It is striking that in Book 8, as the potentially catastrophic consequences of his misjudgement (and Zeus’ deception) are made clear to him, he becomes an object of pity even to the god (8.236-46).

3 Sophocles³⁴

Sophocles’ deployment of dramatic irony has much in common with the Homeric examples analysed above. Sophocles’ human characters, like Homer’s, are denied full or accurate knowledge of the situations in which they find themselves. In P. Judet de La Combe’s formulation, in tragedy,

les personnages [...] entrent en scène en situation de déséquilibre, ne sachant vraiment parler ni d’eux-mêmes ni de ce qui leur arrive, parce qu’ils n’en ont pas connaissance. ³⁵

In contrast, the poet and audience possess superior knowledge; and within the world of the plays, so do the gods – whether or not they appear as characters – and certain privileged individuals such as seers. Sophoclean tragedy, then, reproduces the basic epistemic relationships that are at the heart of the narrative structure of Homeric epic, including the essential opposition between human cognition and divine knowledge. ³⁶ The words or actions of characters on the stage carry different, often opposed meanings for audiences who have a better grasp of the situation and its implications. As in Homer, this can generate a variety of responses including sympathy and identifi-

³² Hainsworth 1993, 61.

³³ Cairns 2012, 6; see also Brügger, Stoevesandt, Visser 2003, 41-2: «Höchste Dramatische Ironie liegt darin, daß Agamemnon diesen Vorwurf hier nur zum Schein äußert, damit aber ... unbewußt die Wahrheit trifft».

³⁴ This section draws on a longer chapter on Sophoclean irony in Johnston, forthcoming.

³⁵ Judet de La Combe 2010, 67.

³⁶ On this contrast in Sophocles, see Diller 1950 (and below).

cation with the characters. The classic example of dramatic irony in Sophocles is *Oedipus Tyrannus*, a play in which almost every line carries potential ironic meanings.³⁷ Spectators who know that Oedipus is the cause of the pollution afflicting Thebes are able to interpret everything he says or does in terms of that knowledge; and Sophocles exploits this epistemic gap to its extremes. I shall only look at one example, from the beginning of the play (137-41):

ὑπὲρ γὰρ οὐχὶ τῶν ἀπωτέρω φίλων
 ἀλλ' αὐτὸς αὐτοῦ τοῦτ' ἀποσκεδῶ μύσος.
 ὅστις γὰρ ἦν ἐκείνον ὁ κτανὼν τάχ' ἂν
 κᾶμ' ἂν τοιαύτη χειρὶ τιμωρεῖν θέλοι.
 κείνῳ προσαρκῶν οὖν ἑμαυτὸν ὠφελῶ.

140

For on behalf of no distant friends, but on my own behalf will I myself dispel this pollution; for whoever the man was who killed [Laius], he might want to kill me too with just such an act of violence; so by helping this man, I aid myself.³⁸

The surface meaning of this passage is straightforward: Oedipus' determination to find Laius' killer stems not only from a sense of religious and political duty; he will do it partly for reasons of self-preservation, because that person might want to harm him, too. Yet the murderer of Laius is, of course, none other than Oedipus himself, Laius' son. To an informed audience, therefore, the friends or relatives (φίλοι) mentioned at 137 become literally "not distant" (οὐχὶ ... ἀπωτέρω, as emphasised by the word order),³⁹ but his own father; there is no uncertainty as to the identity of Laius' killer (as ὅστις ... ἦν, "whoever he is", 139, suggests); and the murderer of Laius will in fact "punish", or "take vengeance" (the primary meaning of τιμωρεῖν, 140) on, Oedipus, since he will eventually harm himself with the very hands (τοιαύτη χειρὶ) that killed his father (140).⁴⁰ Oedipus' language spins out of his control and acquires a life of its own, alluding to the reality of the situation in which he finds himself and correctly predicting what will happen to him. Yet Oedipus himself, because he lacks a crucial piece of information, cannot access the deeper import of his own words.

37 See for instance Finglass 2018, xi: «a large proportion, even a majority of [the play's] lines can be read as conveying degrees of dramatic irony». For fuller analysis of the dramatic ironies and ambiguities of the *OT*, see for instance Stanford 1939, 163-73; Vernant, Vidal-Naquet 1972, 101-31; Goldhill 1986, 205-21 and 2012, 13-15, 27-9; Gould 2001; Lloyd 2012, 567-71.

38 Translation: Finglass.

39 So for instance Kamerbeek 1967, 54-5.

40 See *OT* 107: «the god tells us plainly to punish [Laius'] killers, whoever they may be» (ἐπιστέλλει σαφῶς | τοὺς αὐτοέντας χειρὶ τιμωρεῖν τινάς).

Ironies such as this occur with relentless frequency in the first part of the tragedy. Other particularly striking passages include Oedipus' public excommunication of Laius' murderer and anyone associating with that person (236-75) and his angry dialogue with Tiresias, where he mocks the prophet for being blind and ignorant of the truth (370-7). The audience watch on as the characters' language repeatedly turns against them, anticipating Oedipus' horrific discovery and its consequences. Part of the effect of this pervasive irony is, as in Homer, to emphasise Oedipus' status as a short-sighted and vulnerable human being, who is therefore worthy of pity:⁴¹ as the Chorus put it in the fourth *stasimon*, Oedipus is, in a way, a paradigm (παράδειγμα, 1193) of the nothingness of mortal things and of the gap separating gods from humans, whose lives are defined by suffering and vicissitude.⁴² Dramatic irony is deployed to comparable effect in the prologue of *Ajax*. A dialogue between Athena and Odysseus is followed by a 'play-within-the-play' staged by the goddess, which effectively displays the mechanisms of irony in all their complexity. Having deluded Ajax into thinking that he has killed or captured his enemies, the goddess calls the hero out and has the following exchange with him as Odysseus looks on, invisible to Ajax (89-117):

AΘ.	ὦ οὔτος, Αἴας, δεύτερόν σε προσκαλῶ. τί βαιὸν οὕτως ἐντρέπη τῆς συμμάχου;	90
ΑΙ.	ὦ χαῖρ' Ἀθάνα, χαῖρε Διογενὲς τέκνον, ὡς εὖ παρέστις· καί σε παγχρύσοις ἐγὼ στέψω λαφύροις τῆσδε τῆς ἄγρας χάριν.	
AΘ.	καλῶς ἔλεξας, ἀλλ' ἐκεῖνό μοι φράσον, ἔβασας ἔγχος εὖ πρὸς Ἀργείων στρατῶ;	95
ΑΙ.	κόμπος πάρεστι κούκ ἀπαρνοῦμαι τὸ μῆ.	
AΘ.	ἦ καὶ πρὸς Ἀτρείδαισιν ἤχμασας χέρα;	
ΑΙ.	ὥστ' οὔ ποτ' Αἴανθ' οἶδ' ἀτιμάσουσ' ἔτι.	
AΘ.	τεθῆσιν ἄνδρες, ὡς τὸ σὸν ξυνηῆκ' ἐγὼ.	
ΑΙ.	θανόντες ἤδη τὰμ' ἀφαιρείσθων ὅπλα. [...]	100
AΘ.	σὺ δ' οὖν – ἐπειδὴ τέρψις ἦδ', <ἐν> σοὶ τὸ δρᾶν – χρῶ χειρί, φείδου μηδὲν ὦν περ ἐννοεῖς.	115
ΑΙ.	χωρῶ πρὸς ἔργον· τοῦτο σοὶ δ' ἐφίμαι, τοιάνδ' ἀεὶ μοι σύμμαχον παρεστάται.	

41 The scholia regularly make a similar point: see for example *schol. ad 137*, πεπλαγίστασι δὲ πάλιν ὁ λόγος καὶ τὴν ἀλήθειαν αἰνίττεται τῷ θεάτρῳ ὅτι αὐτὸς δράσας τὸν φόνον ὁ Οἰδίπους καὶ ἑαυτὸν τιμωρήσεται («the speech is again oblique and intimates to the audience the truth that Oedipus himself is the murderer and will take revenge on himself», tr. Nünlist) with *schol. ad 141*, καὶ τοῦτο κινητικὸν τοῦ θεάτρου· τὰ γὰρ ἐναντία προβήσεται («and this too moves the spectator; for the opposite will happen»).

42 See especially Cairns 2013b, 148-9, 168-70.

- ATH. You there, Ajax, I call you a second time! Why have you so little regard for your ally?
- AJ. 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.
- ATH. I thank you; but tell me this, have you well stained your sword in the blood of the Argive army?
- AJ. I have a right to boast, and I shall not deny it!
- ATH. Did you arm your hand against the sons of Atreus too?
- AJ. So that never again shall they refuse honour to Ajax.
- ATH. The men are dead, if I understand your words.
- AJ. Let them try to deprive me of my arms, now that they are dead! [...]
- ATH. Well, since this is your pleasure, the action is in your power! Do not hold your hand, do not stop at anything you have in mind!
- AJ. I go to work! And this I say to you, always stand by me and fight with me thus!⁴³

As N. Lowe has pointed out, the prologue, which repeatedly thematises knowledge and sight, visually represents a «cognitive hierarchy»⁴⁴ similar to that which we have seen at work in Homer: on top, Athena possesses synoptic knowledge and superior perception, and can see and hear both Ajax and Odysseus; in the middle, Odysseus, who has been granted a privileged epistemic position by Athena, understands what is going on and is able to watch Ajax without being seen (like the tragedy's spectators, although they are able to see Athena as well as hear her); at the bottom, Ajax is deluded, with his divinely induced madness compounding the natural limits of his knowledge and perception. The extreme epistemic contrast between Athena (the ironist) and Ajax (the victim) generates striking ironic effects, which can be grasped by the audience as well as by Odysseus. For instance, at 90 Athena, calls herself his "ally" (σύμμαχος) in a knowingly ironic way; and Ajax at 117 echoes her, calling upon her always to "stand by his side" as an "ally of this kind" (τοιάνδ' αἰεί μοι σύμμαχον παρεστάναι; see 92, ὡς εὔ παρεστής), without realising that she is in fact bent on his destruction,⁴⁵ precisely – as the seer Calchas is reported to say later in the play – because Ajax once rejected her offer to be his al-

⁴³ Translation: Lloyd-Jones.

⁴⁴ Lowe 1996, 426.

⁴⁵ Compare Oedipus' appeal to σύμμαχος Δίκη in *OT* 274. As Garvie 1998, 135 notes, τοιάνδ' at *Aj.* 117 «marks the tragic irony. Athena will always be 'this kind' of ally to Ajax, i.e. not an ally at all».

ly in combat (774-5: he calls on her to “stand by” the other Greeks, τοῖς ἄλλοισιν Ἀργείων πέλας | ἵστω).⁴⁶ Similarly, Ajax’s mention of his “hunting” or “quarry” (ἄγρα, 93), by which he designates the enemies he believes he has killed or captured, looks back to earlier mentions of hunting in the prologue, in which Ajax himself is the animal tracked by Odysseus (2, 5-8, 19-20, 32, 37) and thrown into ‘evil nets’ by Athena (60).⁴⁷ Like Oedipus in the *OT*,⁴⁸ Ajax believes he is a powerful hunter, fully in control of the situation, but the audience, Odysseus, and Athena know that in reality he is a weak and blind prey, entirely at the mercy of the goddess who has captured him in her net. Here, too, the dramatic structure and irony are used to turn Ajax into a paradigm of the nothingness of humanity. This is made explicit in the lines immediately following our passage (118-33), where Athena invites Odysseus to draw some conclusions about the spectacle he has just witnessed. The downfall of a man as prudent and circumspect as Ajax is taken as an illustration of the gods’ formidable power (118-20), of the vanity of human attempts to make sense of the world and to act accordingly, and of their insubstantiality, impermanence, and vulnerability to vicissitude (125-6, 129-32). Odysseus’ acknowledgement of the bleakness of the human condition leads him to pity Ajax, who, though his enemy, is a fellow sufferer (121-6).

The parallels with our Homeric examples are clear. Here as in the *OT* passage, Sophocles exploits the shifting epistemic relationships between characters and audiences emerging at various points in the tragedies, creating situations that emphasise the short-sightedness and vulnerability of the characters and turning individuals as different as Oedipus and Ajax into objects of pity. There is also arguably a sense, as in our *Odyssey* passages, that the unconsciously prophetic language of Oedipus or Ajax has a strained quality that can perhaps be associated with divine interference.⁴⁹ Yet some differences can also be observed. The *Ajax* prologue, in particular, although it possesses several striking points of contact with the narrative of the suitors’ slaughter in the *Odyssey*, significantly complicates the modalities of ironic communication. Where in Homer the opposition between ironist (Athena, Odysseus, the audience, the poet) and victim (the suitors) tends to function along a relatively straightforward binary, in *Ajax* things are less clear-cut: the perspectives of Athena, Odysseus, and the audience do not fully align in opposition to

⁴⁶ See also 764-77: Ajax was advised by his father always to seek glory in battle “with a god” (σὺν θεῷ, 765), to which Ajax replies that he will achieve glory without divine help.

⁴⁷ See Jouanna 1977.

⁴⁸ The language of hunting is also applied, with a similar irony and reversal, to Oedipus: see Knox 1957, 111-12.

⁴⁹ For this idea, see especially Jouanna 2010, 480-3.

Ajax's, creating multiple channels of ironic communication.⁵⁰ In this 'play-within-the-play', Sophocles allows his audience to see events from multiple, partially overlapping but different perspectives. Thus, for instance, the conclusions drawn by Athena and Odysseus from the spectacle of the maddened Ajax, although complimentary, focus on different aspects of the gap between human and divine: whereas Athena asserts the power of the gods and their hatred of transgression, Odysseus emphasises the shared vulnerability of humans and the consequent need for pity. Without the guidance of a clear narratorial voice, the audience are left to ponder which – if any – of these perspectives best encapsulates the situation: is Ajax an impious criminal who deserves punishment (but for which crime?), or is he a victim? Is he both of these things, or something else entirely? The complexity of the tragedy's ironic communication ultimately makes it difficult – perhaps impossible – to choose between these alternatives.

I have touched upon a crucial difference between Homeric and Sophoclean irony. In Homer, as we have seen, the fact that a speech or action is ironic, and the precise parameters of that irony, are regularly spelled out to the audience through structural means or through explicit narratorial or divine intervention: thus, in *Iliad* 2, the audience know for certain that Agamemnon's optimism regarding the capture of Troy is misplaced because they know of Zeus' plan to send the deceptive dream to Agamemnon, and the narrator explicitly tells them, several times, that Agamemnon will not capture Troy at this time. Because the epic narrator, *via* the gods, grants them access to this information, the poem's hearers or readers can frequently see the reality behind the appearance and perceive clearly what we might term, after W. Booth, 'stable' ironies; that is, ironies in which «the reader's or the audience's search for an ironic subtext terminates with a single, finite interpretation».⁵¹ This kind of irony is also common in Sophocles, where prior knowledge, dramatic structure, and divine revelation can offer the audience clear insights into aspects of the situation which escape the characters within the drama. Thus, both prior knowledge and Tiresias' revelations enable the spectators of the *OT* to perceive the ironies in Oedipus' speech, and Athena's revelations fulfil this role in the *Ajax* prologue. Yet partly for reasons inherent to the dramatic structure of tragedy, and partly (as I shall argue) for reasons of epistemology and theology, Sophoclean irony is often more obscure and difficult to define clearly. In this sense, it overlaps with aspects of Booth's 'unstable' irony, a kind of irony «in which the truth asserted or implied is that no stable reconstruction

⁵⁰ See Lowe 1996, 526-8; Lloyd 2012, 571-2.

⁵¹ Lowe 1996, 521.

can be made out of the ruins revealed through the irony». ⁵² Thus, in Sophocles, the ‘stable’ ironies I have discussed are accompanied, or compounded, by ironies which, because of the absence of explicit narratorial voice, the silence and inscrutability of the gods, and – as a consequence of both these states of affairs – the incompleteness of the information disclosed to the audience, remain unclear.

Ironies of this kind occur everywhere in Sophocles. As S. Goldhill has shown, they can be found lurking behind the most mundane, everyday words or expressions. ⁵³ They are perhaps especially marked in choral odes and the endings of plays, two sites of particularly acute instability, ⁵⁴ but also – predictably – in passages concerning supernatural intervention, which are inherently subject to uncertainty. ⁵⁵ Characters in Sophocles regularly make claims about gods, or appeal to them in prayer, in ways that ironically expose their imperfect understanding of them. These ironies are sometimes legible for the audience (in passages, such as the prologue of *Ajax*, where the parameters of divine action are laid out relatively clearly); yet in most cases the spectators find themselves in the same epistemic position as the characters in the drama, forced to speculate uncertainly about the role of the divine in the events they are witnessing. Thus, at *Oedipus Tyrannus* 919-23, Jocasta prays to Lycian Apollo for deliverance; her prayer is immediately followed by the arrival of the Messenger with the news that Oedipus’ father Polybus died of natural causes (and that Oedipus did not therefore murder his own father). This positive turn of events, which Jocasta and Oedipus take as evidence that Apollo’s oracle was wrong (945-6, 964-72), quickly turns to disaster as they learn that Oedipus was not in fact Polybus’ son (984-1072). Audience members may be tempted to see the hand of Apollo in this succession of events. They might, quite plausibly, think that the god ironically answers Jocasta’s prayer by immediately sending a Messenger with news that brings deliverance (or release, *λύσις*, 921) of a kind. Yet no certainty is possible. ⁵⁶ Although Sophocles has confirmed through Tiresias that Apollo wishes Oedipus’ downfall (376-7) and is somehow involved in bringing it about, it is never clear exactly when and how the god intervenes. Thus, although the audience are in a position of superior knowledge and can therefore perceive the

⁵² Booth 1974, 240. See also Lowe 1996, 521: ironies «whose ironic ripples spread out indefinitely to undercut everything, including the decipherability of the ironic message itself».

⁵³ Goldhill 2012, 13-37.

⁵⁴ On endings, see for instance Roberts 1988; Garvie 2014; Johnston 2021.

⁵⁵ See for instance Parker 1999; Budelmann 2000, 133-94.

⁵⁶ On this passage, see for instance Gould 2001, 246; Goldhill 2012, 13-14; Cairns 2013b, 133-4.

potential ironies of Jocasta's prayer and subsequent events, they remain as blind as the characters on the stage regarding the workings of the divine. The sense of uncertainty expressed in this kind of 'unstable' irony is arguably reflective of an epistemological framework that sheds doubt on the possibility of successful human knowledge and communication. Given the distance and impenetrability of the divine, the possibilities of accessing reality and truth are radically limited. To creatively paraphrase the Guard in *Antigone*, humans perceive an appearance (δοκεῖν), and if they are fortunate, they get it right; if they are not, and are led by false ideas (ψευδῆ δοκεῖν, 323), then they may have to suffer in consequence.

4 Conclusion

Although my analysis of Sophocles, Homer, and dramatic irony differs in important respects from Thirlwall's 1833 interpretations, I hope this short essay has shown that we should still give serious consideration to his insights about the theological weight and implications of irony. The examples examined above suggest that dramatic irony in Homer and Sophocles is closely intertwined with conceptions of humans and gods, and particularly the contrast between human cognition and divine knowledge. The epic poet or tragedian deploys narrative structure to fashion a world in which characters enact such theological and philosophical ideas. Dramatic irony is a lynchpin of this interaction of structure and ideas. By exploiting the differing levels of knowledge between the characters and the audience, the poet is able to create situations that expose, and emphasise, the vulnerability of human beings to the movements of the world, and to explore the consequences of that vulnerability. Audience members are thus placed in a temporary state of superior knowledge, allowing them an insight into what it is like to exist in such a world, and allowing them to reflect on their own and others' status as human beings and on their relationship with the divine. More speculatively, I have also suggested that certain cases of dramatic irony and the resulting ambiguity may be seen as staging a process in which the gods actively impinge upon mortal cognition and speech, jeopardising or negating humans' ability to articulate their own thoughts and control their language. On the limited basis of the readings offered above, I would thus suggest that Homeric and Sophoclean dramatic irony not only derives from the blending of narrative structure and contemporary discourse on the nature of, and relationship between, humans and gods; it instantiates, and contributes to communicating, this discourse.

These reflections on dramatic irony, narrative structure, and ideas raise important questions about the nature of ancient Greek poet-

ry and its relationship to theology, belief, and philosophy. They also shed light on the relation between epic and tragedy. As I have tried to show, the deployment of dramatic irony in Homer and Sophocles presupposes a shared intellectual background revolving around the core notion of the gap between human and divine, and particularly the contrast between human cognition and divine knowledge. Yet the two poets, and their respective genres, build on that shared background differently. In Homeric epic, the inspired narrator is able to provide his audience with a panoramic picture of past, present, and future, including the world of the gods. Although the poet essentially remains a short-sighted human being, theoretically at the mercy of divine deception (as *Iliad* 2.284-7 suggests),⁵⁷ the overwhelming sense is that he offers a clear and full picture of the events he recounts. This is emphasised by regular narratorial interventions which guide the audience's reactions and provide reminders or indications of the broad reality underlying the narrative. In Sophocles, by contrast, although the spectators usually know more than the characters within the drama (leading to instances of 'stable' irony similar to those found in Homer), the picture often remains incomplete and obscure. The audience does not see or hear the narrator, and is not told how much he knows and whether he has any kind of special insight into things not normally available to mortal minds. The gods are more distant and obscure. As a result, the spectators often find themselves in the same epistemic predicament as the characters within the plays, forced to peer through the dense layers of appearance and deception to catch a dim glimpse of reality.

I have tried to argue that the deployment of dramatic irony in Homeric epic and Sophoclean tragedy simultaneously reveals a shared theological and philosophical background and certain differences. It would require far greater space than I have here to explore these differences, and to find potential reasons behind them. I would however suggest that they are not symptomatic of a fundamental intellectual gap between Homeric epic and tragedy, or the 'archaic' and 'classical' (or 'tragic') worlds. Rather, Sophocles exploits a possibility that remains latent in Homer to develop a more pessimistic, but equally theological, epistemology.

⁵⁷ See Tor 2017, 63, 82.

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