Of all the literary concepts we have investigated this year, irony is by far the trickiest. It is often difficult to recognize, and it is even harder to write about. Unfortunately for those who struggle with irony, it (and associated concepts like paradox, hyperbole, and understatement) is often used by College Board to separate out the stronger candidates from the weaker.

You can expect, for instance, at least one reading on the test (of the five to six) to require a mature understanding of irony in order to arrive at a satisfactory reading, and it is more commonly two readings that are explicitly ironic (one in the multiple choice, one in the essays). If you include readings with contradictions that rise to the level of paradox, you are usually looking at more than half the total readings. In other words, not only would I be worried about understanding the concept of irony, but I would be actively looking for it throughout the test. In fact, the first question I would ask myself when encountering *any* reading is whether it is meant to be read ironically or straight, for to misread tone is to misread.

Given this, I'm including here the first chapter of Claire Colebrook's *Irony* as a supplemental reading to better aid your understanding. This text has a number of advantages: it's an introductory text whose intended audience is primarily undergraduate students (meaning it is not too technical); it provides a very succinct and informative overview of the subject (meaning it not long-winded or overly dry); and it does not presume lots of background knowledge (meaning it is accessible).

I will be discussing these issues in class and providing examples from texts you have been reading in the last few weeks, but there is not a single student who wouldn't benefit from reading this. That said, I realize a depressingly high number of you are not really interested in mastery-- instead displaying a "that'll do" attitude toward your learning. This is why it appears here instead of me running off copies of something many of you wouldn't bother to read.

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The Concept of Irony (Chapter One from *Irony*) By Claire Colebrook

Despite its unwieldy complexity, irony has a frequent and common definition: saying what is contrary to what is meant (Quintilian 1995-98 [9.2.44], 401), a definition that is usually attributed to the first-century Roman orator Quintilian who was already looking back to Socrates and Ancient Greek literature. But this definition is so simple that it covers everything from simple figures of speech to entire historical epochs. Irony can mean as little as saying, 'Another day in paradise', when the weather is appalling. It can also refer to the huge problems of postmodernity; our very historical context is ironic because today nothing really means what it says. We live in a world of quotation, pastiche, simulation and cynicism: a general and all-encompassing irony. Irony, then, by the very simplicity of its definition becomes curiously indefinable.

THE HISTORY OF IRONY: FROM *EIRONEIA* TO *IRONIA*

In the comic plays of Aristophanes (257-180 BC) *eironeia* referred to lying rather than complex dissimulation. When *eironeia*, not much later than Aristophanes, came to refer to a dissimulation that was not deceitful but clearly recognisable, and intended to be recognised, irony intersected with the political problem of human meaning. The problem of irony is at one with the problem of politics: how do we know what others really mean, and on what basis can we secure the sincerity and authenticity

of speech? The word *eironeia* was first used to refer to artful double meaning in the Socratic dialogues of Plato, where the word is used both as pejorative-- in the sense of lying-- and affirmatively, to refer to Socrates' capacity to conceal what he really means. It was this practice of concealment that opened the Western political/philosophical tradition, for it is through the art of playing with meaning that the interlocutors of a dialogue are compelled to question the fundamental concepts of our language.

Plato's Socrates has, from Quintilian to the present, been identified with the practice of irony. Socrates often spoke as though he were ignorant or respectful, precisely when he wished to expose his interlocutor's ignorance. He would ask someone for the definition of friendship or justice and then allow the confident and ready definitions of everyday speech to be exposed in all their contradictory incompleteness. By demanding a definition from those who presented themselves as masters of wisdom, Socrates showed how some terms were less self-evident and definitive than everyday meaning would seem to suggest. It is no accident that Socrates used irony to challenge received knowledge and wisdom at a historical moment when the comfort and security of small communities were being threatened by political expansion and the inclusion of other cultures. The tribal cultures of Ancient Greece were opening out to imperial expansion and the inclusion of others. It is at this moment of cultural insecurity-- in the transition from the closed community to a polis of competing viewpoints-- that the concept of irony is formed. *Eironeia* is no longer lying or deceit but a complex rhetorical practice whereby one can say one thing-- such as Socrates' claim to be ignorant-- but mean quite another, as when Socrates' exposes the supposedly wise as lacking in all insight. Socrates tried to show that it is always possible that what we take to be the self-evident sense of a context or culture is far from obvious; it may be that what is being said is not meant.

Today, despite its major differences, 'postmodern' irony also has this distancing function: we wear 1980s disco clothing or listen to 1970s country and western music, not because we are committed to particular styles or senses but because we have started to question sincerity and commitment in general; everything is as kitsch and dated as everything else, so all we can do is quote and dissimulate. But even in a world of postmodern irony, the very sense that everything is somehow quoted or simulated relies on a lost sense of the truly valuable or original. Both Socrates' questions and the contemporary use of parody and quotation rely on distinguishing between those statements and actions that we genuinely intend and those that we repeat or mime only to expose their emptiness. How do we acquire the sort of insider knowledge that allows us to interpret a text or context and distinguish the ironic from the non- ironic? How do we know when a speaker is *not* sincere? This chapter provides a history and overview of competing approaches to irony but in doing so it is already within the problem of irony. For the very practice of charting and explaining a series of epochs and cultures relies on being able to identify and understand each writer's specific culture or context. In many ways, then, we have to be ironic: capable of maintaining a distance from any single definition or context, quoting and repeating various voices from the past. But we also have to be wary of irony; we have to be sure that the past we grasp means what it seems to mean.

It is a peculiarly modern gesture to think of differing epochs, each with their own standard of truth. In order to think of the relative truth and difference of historical contexts or epochs we have to imagine that certain contexts may he meaningful and coherent and yet no longer be held as true. We read the sense of past texts and contexts without belief or commitment, seeing and recognising the 'truths' of the past but not holding to those truths. Only with some concept of irony is it possible to range across literary history. The idea of past contexts that are meaningful in themselves but which are no longer 'ours' requires the ironic viewpoint of detachment. Through irony we can discern the meaning or sense of a context without participating in, or being committed to, that context.

Hayden White (1973, 375) argues that the very notion of modern history is essentially ironic: for the historian must *read* the past as if there were some meaning of the past not apparent to the past itself. The past always means more than it explicitly 'says'. The historian must not take the past

at its word but always be other than the worlds she surveys. Furthermore, once we become aware of, and sensitive to, the notion of irony and specific historical contexts it becomes possible to read irony back into earlier texts. Irony destroys the immediacy and sincerity of life; through irony we do not just live the meanings of our world, we can ask what these meanings are *really* saying. Not only, then, does irony share the fluidity and context-dependency of all general concepts; it is the very notion of irony that allows us to think of competing and discontinuous contexts. Reading ironically means, in complex ways, not taking things at their word; it means looking beyond standard use and exchange to what this or that might *really mean*. This can be simple. If I say, 'This is paradise!' and our context-- the weather outside-- is clearly not blissful, then you know I am being ironic. But what happens in literature where, precisely because texts circulate from other contexts, we have no obvious context to refer to? Irony therefore raises the question of literary interpretation: if we know what a word means according to its context, how do we know or secure a proper context?

Shakespearean drama, for example, was once read and received as a sincere defence and representation of the well-ordered, pre-modern cosmos (Bradley 1905). Such a reading was possible only because of a (then) widely shared notion about historical context: the Elizabethan world-view was one of unquestioning belief and obedience to ordained law (Lovejoy 1936). Today, however, Shakespeare is often read ironically: not as a writer who represented the standard world-view, but as a dramatist who displayed and invented that world-view as a position to be questioned (Dollimore and Sinfield 1985; Drakakis 1995). Such new readings are possible because critics have recreated the supposedly original context. According to the new historicist criticism that was dominant in the 1980s, contexts are not passive backgrounds to the texts we read; contexts are created by texts, with each text also presenting the instabilities and insecurities of context. A text is never just what it says; it also displays the production and force of different ways of speaking. According to Stephen Greenblatt, the Renaissance was an era of competing and contested representations (Greenblatt 1988). Texts were anything but sincere; they presented standard Elizabethan myths of power *as* myths. The very practice of re-reading the past and of suspecting that all those texts that were once read as sincere might actually be critical of the power they describe depends upon the structure of irony. It is always possible, particularly if we question or re-invent a context, that a text can be read as having a meaning *other than* what it says. The twentieth-century writer Jorge Luis Borges gives a stunning example of how even the most sacred texts can be exposed to irony. In 'Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote', Borges describes the project of a twentieth-century author who sets himself the task of rewriting Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. Simply transcribing the novel would be too facile a task, so Pierre Menard decides to project himself into the position of the original Cervantes. Eventually, he produces one identical paragraph of the 'original' text. Of course this completely identical paragraph is stunningly ironic, for the very circumstance of its new context gives it an entirely transformed sense. Borges then suggests that all the texts of Western culture could benefit from this imaginative device. What if we were to imagine The *Imitation of Christ* as authored by James Joyce (Borges 1965, 51)?[1]

This process of ironic re-reading, where we dare to imagine a text as somehow meaning something other than what it explicitly says, characterises much of what counts as literary criticism. Indeed, one could argue-- as many twentieth-century critics were to do-- that literature is characterised by its potential for irony, its capacity to mean something other than a common-sense or everyday use of language. To see Shakespeare as ironic is not just to see him, as a playwright, as distanced from the world he presents. It is also a recognition of our capacity as readers to question whether a literary text is at one with what it 'says'; for a text can always be read as if it were presenting or 'mentioning' a world-view, rather than intending that world-view. This is one mode of irony: a writer uses all the figures and conventions of a context while refraining from belief or

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[1] *De Imitatione Christi* (ca. 1420), a devotional text by theologian Thomas à Kempis (ca. 1380-1471); by contrast, 20th century Irish novelist James Joyce (1882-1941) was a Catholic apostate and religious skeptic

commitment. We can imagine an author behind the work who presents certain positions but does not really intend or mean what is said. It is possible to read Shakespeare ironically, not because we are secure about context, but because the very idea of what counted as *the* Elizabethan context is, and was, up for question. Shakespeare would be read as sincere and non-ironic if we simply believed in the Renaissance past as a time of unquestioned duty and belief; he would be ironic, however, if we felt that his drama, as art, displayed that belief in order to show its limits and fragility.

Nowadays there are countless books and articles referring to the irony of medieval, Renaissance and even biblical texts. Such forays into the past are justified by the continual use of the word *ironia* throughout the Middle Ages. Authors as early as Bede (672/3-735) and Erasmus found *ironia* in the bible (Knox 1989, 29). Their cited examples were those of explicit mockery, such as the taunt made by the chief priests and elders to Christ: 'Prophesy to us, 0 Christ, who he is that smote you' (Matthew xxvi 68). Today, though, the analysis of irony in biblical and ancient texts extends beyond such isolated and explicit examples to an irony that pervades the text as a whole (Camery-Hoggatt 1992; Duke 1985; Good 1965; Plank 1987). What needs to be understood in any history of irony is the complex and ironic process of 'reading back'. Once we have the concept and theory of irony it is possible to discern ironic strands in literature that did not, itself, use or theorise the concept of irony.

Before the explicit and extended theorisation of irony in the nineteenth century, irony was a recognised but minor and subordinate figure of speech. The first significant instances of the Greek word *eironeia* occur in the dialogues of Plato (428-347 BC), with reference to Socrates. It is here that *eironeia* no longer meant straightforward lying, as it did for Aristophanes, but an intended simulation which the audience or hearer was meant to recognise. As we will see in the next chapter, Socratic irony was defined not just as the use of irony in conversation but also as an entire personality. Aristotle (384-322 BC) also referred to irony, most notably in his *Ethics and Rhetoric*, but it was the Platonic and Socratic use that became definitive for later thought. Aristotle's ironist was, like Plato's Socrates, one who played down or concealed his virtues and intelligence (Aristotle 1934 [*Nicomachean Ethics* 4.7.3-5], 241). Aristotle regarded such an ironic personality as neither pernicious nor ideal. Irony was not a vice but it was far from being a virtue. The truly virtuous citizen would be neither boastful, nor ironic, but sincere in his self-presentation.

It would seem to make sense, then, to look at Socrates as the very beginning of irony. For it was in Plato's Socratic dialogues that irony referred to both a complex figure of speech and the creation of an enigmatic personality. Many nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers have done just this, and placed Socrates at the centre of the concept of irony (Kierkegaard [1841] 1989; Nehamas 1988 and 1999).[2] Some go so far as to say that Socrates' ironic personality inaugurated a peculiarly Western sensibility (Lefebvre 1995, 12; Vlastos 1991, 29, 44). His irony, or his capacity not to accept everyday values and concepts but live in a state of perpetual question, is the birth of philosophy, ethics and consciousness. The problem with seeing Socrates as the origin of irony, and irony as the essence of Western consciousness, is that the awareness of Socrates and Socratic irony was virtually absent from medieval and Renaissance works on irony and rhetoric. Although Quintilian referred to Socrates, it was his distinction between verbal irony, as a figure of speech, and irony as an extended figure of thought that led to a strictly rhetorical tradition of defining irony. Irony was explained by isolated literary examples, such as those Quintilian himself drew from Homer and Virgil, and not by the complexity of the Socratic personality. The Latin manuals on rhetoric written up until the Renaissance knew the Greek sources primarily through what was available of Cicero and Quintilian. Even in the Renaissance, when the Socratic dialogues and the fuller works of Cicero became

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[2] [author's note] Dates in square brackets are those of first publication. Dates in curved brackets are those of modern editions listed in the references, and page numbers refer to these.

available, *ironia* was not considered to be the full-scale mode of Socratic existence that it was for nineteenth-century writers. *Ironia* was a trope or figure of speech, an artful way of using language.

Until the Renaissance, irony was theorised within rhetoric and was often listed as a type of allegory: as one way among others for saying one thing and meaning another. When the Greek and Latin descriptions of Socrates became available to Renaissance writers, irony was still not what it was to become for the Romantics (an attitude to existence). Irony was a rhetorical method. The Latin rhetorical manuals known in the Middle Ages had their origin in juridical and manifestly political situations; they instructed how best to construct speeches for the purposes of defence, praise or public persuasion. There was very little that was 'literary' or creative in such uses of rhetoric. *Ironia*, as defined by those who followed Cicero and Quintilian, had little to do with creating an artful mode of self and consciousness. *Ironia* was a way of making what one said and meant more effective; it was not a way of abstaining from belief or commitment. Later, in the Middle Ages, the prime purpose of rhetorical treatises was instruction for religious sermons and writing, although the models used were still the original Latin contexts of juridical defence and persuasion (Kennedy 1980, 24). Again, *ironia* was a limited technique, part of the method of effective speaking. It was ultimately in the service of getting one's point across. It did not constitute an entire style or mode of delivery, but could be used within speeches and writings to serve the overall effect. One could not have said that a text or person was 'ironic' any more than it would have made sense to refer to someone as 'metaphorical'; irony was a specific device, not a sensibility or attitude.

When the Renaissance became aware of the original Greek and extended Latin references to Socrates as an ironist the concept of irony was expanded from being one figure of speech among others to being a figure that could characterise an entire personality. Socrates' irony was habitual or extended: he tended to use irony frequently and as a mode of argument. But even here Socrates was certainly not celebrated as the epitome of Western consciousness, nor was irony granted a fundamental role in the definition of literature or literary awareness. If Socrates, today, is the beginning of irony and Western consciousness, he is so in a quite modern sense. Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian all defined irony in reference to Socrates, but they did not see irony as a radically transformative political position; Socrates' irony was one technique among others for political discussion. Since the nineteenth century, however, Socratic irony has come to mean more than just a figure of speech and refers to a capacity to remain distant and different from what is said in general. If there has always been irony, both in practice and in name, it has not always taken the same form. This historical problem places us in an ironic predicament: how justified are we in reading past texts as ironic; do they mean what they seem to be saying?

So, in thinking about irony historically we have to try to separate the sources for the definition of irony (which range from Ancient Greece to the present) from the past texts to which we can now apply the idea of irony. On the one hand, there are uses of the word 'irony' throughout literary history to name varying levels of linguistic complexity. On the other, there are instances of language that we can now identify as ironic, even if they were not explicitly labelled as such. In addition to specific references to irony and uses of irony throughout history there is also a historical shift in the status of irony. At a certain point in history, particularly with the self-conscious recognition of being modern in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, irony was seen to characterise life as a whole. Once irony was expanded to this degree it was then possible to look back, not just at Socrates but at Shakespeare or Chaucer, and see their writing as subtly ironic.

MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE IRONY

As noted above, the most recognised definitions of irony came from Cicero and Quintilian. Medieval and Renaissance authors who did not have access to these texts directly were nevertheless aware of the tradition of Ciceronian rhetoric through later sources. The most important of these later sources

were the widely used grammars by Aelius Donatus (AD 4), and Isidore of Seville (*c.*570-636), whose *Origines* or *Etymologiae* served as rhetorical encyclopedia throughout the Middle Ages. Both these sources continue the idea of irony as saying the opposite or contrary of what is meant and make no reference to a broader irony that would characterise an entire personality or even an entire text. Donatus, in his monumental *Ars Grammatica*, defined irony as a trope where the real meaning is the opposite of the apparent meaning: *tropus per contrarium quod conatur ostendens* (Donatus 1864, 401). Irony was employed within texts and speeches for clearly intended and recognisable reasons. Like Quintilian, Isidore of Seville defined irony as a figure of speech and as a figure of thought-- with the figure of speech, or clearly substituted word, being the primary example. The figure of thought occurs when irony extends across a whole idea, and does not just involve the substitution of one word for its opposite. So, 'Tony Blair is a saint' is a figure of speech or verbal irony if we really think that Blair is a devil; the word 'saint' substitutes for its opposite. 'I must remember to invite you here more often' would be a figure of thought, if I really meant to express my displeasure at your company. Here, the figure does not lie in the substitution of a word, but in the expression of an opposite sentiment or idea. When medieval and Renaissance writers were ironic, it was this local and rhetorical mode of irony that was employed: an irony that could be explained either through the substitution of a word for its opposite or as adopting, say, an expression of praise when derision is really implied.

When later writers have looked back at pre-modern examples of irony they have argued that writers from Bede to Chaucer were aware of the concept of irony (Knox 1989, 8-9), and they have also been able to identify cases of irony. They have done so by appealing either to the context of the literary work as a whole, or to the social context in which such works were written. D. H. Green (1979) has not only argued that cases of simple and complex irony can be found in medieval literature and that medieval writers were aware of the rhetoric of irony; he has also described specific reasons for irony in the medieval romance tradition. We can discern irony in medieval literature, Green argues, because works are no longer circulated anonymously and orally but are attributed to specific authors (Green 1979, 6). So, we can ask, 'Is this meant ironically?' and refer not just to the odd word, but to entire speeches within a work. We can question an overall intent. Also, Green argues, the writer of romances would have occupied a distanced and critical position in relation to the courts and would have used irony to say implicitly what it might not have been politic to say outright. This is, of course, a crucial feature and possibility of irony in any age, but as Green notes, the conditions of court and patronage would have been particularly constraining on expression and would have been conducive to using indirect modes of expression such as irony (Green 1979, 359). Furthermore, at the time of the writing of romances there were remnants of the social ideal of the ironic citizen-- going back to Socrates-- as an elevated and urbane individual; such an ideal is perfectly in keeping with the values of courtly life (ibid. 341). Most of the examples cited by Green, however, are cases of simple irony, clearly identified by being incongruous with their context. When Gawain, prior to having his head chopped off, is greeted with, 'Now, Sir swete', the politeness is dearly *not* intended (ibid. 206).

Green, arguing for irony in medieval romances, gives a wealth of extended examples of irony. His analyses are typical of many arguments in literary criticism that identify irony across the range of literature in English, from Chaucer and Shakespeare to Austen and Eliot. Here the irony can either lie in the situation, where what the character says is undermined by what they do or say elsewhere; or, the irony can lie in the speech itself where the rhetoric is so excessive or clichéd that we suspect the author of ironising the character's own limited imagination. The opening of Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale* offers two modes of extended irony. To begin with, the irony is a typical example of excessive praise signalling irony. We read the celebration of marriage ironically because the merchant has already expressed his dissatisfaction with his wife ('I have a wyf, the worste that may be' [1218]), so the context signals that the character cannot mean what he says. However, as in all literature, we are challenged as to where the irony lies: does the character intend the irony, by wanting to be understood as not praising marriage, or does Chaucer intend the irony, by suggesting that all such

praises and eulogies will be undermined by real love and marriages? It is not just the context that gives away irony in this case. The speech is so excessive that even if there were no contextual clue we might suspect irony. Our context could be human life and marriage in general: could anyone really love his wife and marriage *this much*? If one did want to offer such an exceeding praise of love and do so sincerely, then we would need a more elaborate context: say, the plot of *Romeo and Juliet* where the circumstances and characters would seem to he able to mean and intend such words sincerely. And, as anyone who tries to write on love knows, in order for the words to appear as sincere, we cannot just use everyday language excessively. So, when we do hear characters using praise in a clichéd but intense manner, we expect that the author wants us to hear more than, or something other than, praise. The ironic meaning is, perhaps, 'how ungrounded, insincere and empty all this excessive praise must be!' The irony here does not lie in a single word but requires the whole passage to alert us that what is being said is not what is meant.

  Many commentators on pre-modern irony give examples where praise is so excessive that it *must* be ironic. But if excessive rhetoric triggers this suspicion we would still require some confirmation or assumption about context to conclude that irony were present. What distinguishes an ironic use of excessive and contradictory rhetoric from a text that simply is excessive? Green's examples of medieval irony are all explained from the context of the narrative as a whole, what characters have said, or what the author (we assume) must have meant. Dilwyn Knox (1989), who also argues for the frequent use of irony in medieval literature, does, however, cite an example where such contextual clues were not read, and the obviously ironic text was read as sincere. The excessive and inappropriate praise did not arouse suspicion and, as a consequence, the text did not have its intended force and effect. The late medieval poem, *Liber de Statu Curie*, probably written between 1261 and 1265 by Magister Henricus Wurzburg, is a dialogue that appears to praise the clergy and the holy city. The character Ganfridus assures his interlocutor of the honesty, safeness and integrity of Rome. He insists that the doctors charge moderately for their services, that the cardinals eat frugally and refuse all wine, and are generous to the poor and destitute. Now, two things need to be noted. The first is the excessiveness of the praise. Ganfridus is not offering a moderate defence; indeed, he assumes the clergy and Rome to be beyond all reproach. To any astute reader who knows about the supposed corruption of the clergy at this time, such unquestioning praise will be obviously ironic. Second, the irony is signalled in the text, with the speaker lamenting that 'hic fuit antiphrasis'-- there has been antiphrasis, or saying what is contrary. Knox notes, however, that this conclusion was not in all texts, and was not in the copy lodged in the papal library of Eusebius IV. From this he concludes that the obvious irony was not always recognised. The text was read as a sincere praise of the clergy, and would need to be so if included in the papal library.

  This raises two issues. First, even the most 'obvious' ironies bear the possibility of not being read, and they do so precisely *because* of the contextual nature of irony. How could the papacy itself conclude that a eulogy of Rome was *obviously* ironic? Irony, even at its most obvious, is always diagnostic and political: to read the irony you do not just have to know the context; you also have to be committed to specific beliefs and positions *within* that context. Irony must be partial and selective. If the context were unanimous-- if we *all* believed without question in the corruption of the clergy-- then how could we present a character as ironically praising the clergy? His words would not make sense if praise were not a possible position within our context. In order for the irony to work there must be some possible speakers who would believe or intend what is being said. Second, this example is taken from dialogue. The author presents possible voices and positions, allowing those positions to disclose their own incoherence. In these cases of extended irony, then, what is actually intended is not what the *speaker* wants to say. In fact, just where the intention or irony lies becomes difficult to discern. In the case cited from Knox, we would say that the author of the dialogue really meant to say that the clergy are corrupt and did so by having a character utter praise that was obviously incongruous. The irony of *Liber de Statu Curie* works towards another intended meaning,

and it does so by appealing to another context: those of us who recognise the clergy as corrupt. But irony cannot always be determined in this way; in any collection of competing voices it is always possible that the underlying or unifying intention is undecidable.

The idea that 'behind' the voices of Shakespeare, Chaucer or even Plato there is a univocal intent, and that such an intent is secured by context, is highly problematic. For part of what we do when we read *literature* is to look at what a text can do in contexts beyond its original intent and conventions (Miller 1998, 172). Something like this is given in the example already cited by Knox: how much greater the force and irony of an anti-clerical text when it is lodged in the papal library and read as sincere! The irony here is not intended; it occurs or 'happens' when texts diverge from their original contexts. Such an irony is only later discerned, and so perhaps is not even present. Similarly, once we have the concept of complex irony, an irony that extends beyond a word or figure substituted within the text, we are capable of questioning the sincerity or authenticity of any text. To what extent can a text be controlled or governed by its original context? When the Romantic poets argued that Milton's devil was the hero of *Paradise Lost* (1667), and was so in spite of Milton's intention (Wittreich 1991), they relied on the notion that a text has a force that is not reducible to what the author wanted to say. Milton may have wanted to present Satan as evil, but the force of the words that the character of Satan used had an appeal and implication well beyond Milton's piety. By the same token, when we isolate irony in Homer, Chaucer or Shakespeare-- even when those authors did not refer to their texts *as ironic*-- we acknowledge that there must be clues for reading irony that go beyond authorial intent.

Irony is just this capacity to consider a work as a text: as a production that is not reducible to conscious intent or the manifest work. But if we are to give irony any specificity we need to ask just how it is that we take some texts to mean what they say, and other texts to be other than, or distanced from, what they say.

COSMIC, TRAGIC OR DRAMATIC IRONY AND EVERYDAY IRONY

Before going on to look at the complexities of literary irony in the following chapters, we can consider the ways in which we use the concept of irony in everyday and non-literary contexts. There are two broad uses in everyday parlance. The first relates to cosmic irony and has little to do with the play of language or figural speech. A Wimbledon commentator may say, 'Ironically, it was the year that he was given a wild-card entry, and not as a seeded player, that the Croatian won the title.' The irony here refers, like linguistic irony, to a doubleness of sense or meaning. It is as though there is the course of human events and intentions, involving our awarding of rankings and expectations, that exists alongside another order of fate beyond our predictions. This is an irony of situation, or an irony of existence; it is as though human life and its understanding of the world is undercut by some other meaning or design beyond our powers. It is this form of irony that covers everything from statements such as, 'Ironically, Australians are spending more than ever on weight-loss formulas while becoming increasingly obese', to observations like, 'The film ends ironically, with the music of the young and hopeful cellist played as we see her crippled and wasted body.' In such cases, the word irony refers to the limits of human meaning; we do not see the effects of what we do, the outcomes of our actions, or the forces that exceed our choices. Such irony is cosmic irony, or the irony of fate.

Related to cosmic irony, or the way the word 'irony' covers twists of fate in everyday life, is the more literary concept of dramatic or tragic irony. This is most intense when the audience knows what will happen, so that a character can be viewed from an almost God-like position where we see her at the mercy of the plot or destiny (Sedgwick 1935). If irony is taken in its broadest sense as a doubleness of meaning, where what is said is limited or undercut by what is implied, then we can start to include ironies that are not rhetorical, that have little to do with speech or language. Such ironies were not labelled as ironies until the nineteenth century (Thirlwall 1833, 490), but it is frequently argued that even ancient texts display this mode of irony. Tragic irony is exemplified in ancient drama

and is intensified by the fact that most of the plots were mythic. The audience watched a drama unfold, already knowing its destined outcome. There was already a sense of irony or mourning in the predetermined plot, as though the drama could only unfold an already given destiny, as though the time when human action could be open and determining was already lost. In Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, for example, 'we' (the audience) can see what Oedipus is blind to. The man he murders is his father, but he does not know it. In so doing he not only does more than he intends, he also fulfils a destiny that he and the audience have heard at the opening of the play from the prophet Teirisias, but whose meaning only 'we' fully hear:

> You have your eyes but see not where you are
> in sin, nor where you live, nor whom you live with.
> Do you know who your parents are? Unknowing
> you are an enemy to kith and kin
> in death, beneath the earth, and in this life.
> A deadly footed, double striking curse,
> from father and mother both, shall drive you forth
> out of this land, with darkness on your eyes,
> that now have such straight vision.
> (Sophocles 1942, 128, 413-19)

We might say that we can get a sense of this tragic or dramatic irony today, either by the fact that we know the plot of *Macbeth* and can see Macbeth hurtling towards his end, despite his ambitions, or by the fact that we are aware of the forces of plot and genre (Blissett 1959). In the case of *Macbeth* we may know the meaning of the witches' prediction and see Macbeth misinterpret what they say, precisely because he believes too readily in his power to act and determine his own end. But even if we do not know or see the actual plot we can experience a tragic or dramatic irony through the experience of plot as such. We can watch a film, and once we get a sense that its genre is one of tragedy or horror, we can 'know' that the central character will meet his end; we can see all his hopes and efforts as ironic. We see that he is blind to what *must* befall him.

Dramatic, cosmic and tragic irony are ways of thinking about the relation between human intent and contrary outcomes. This sense of irony is related to verbal irony in that both share a notion of a meaning or intent beyond what we manifestly say or intend. In dramatic and cosmic irony this other meaning is plot or destiny. In verbal irony the other meaning is either what the speaker intends or what the hearer understands; but how do we know just what this other meaning is?

On the one hand, we might say that cosmic irony is something we can discern across history, from Sophocles to Shakespeare to modern film, and we might also say the same about verbal irony: that it is always possible for texts to play with contexts and assumptions. On the other hand, we might want to ask why the problem of these modes of irony was made explicit in the nineteenth century.

THE PROBLEM OF IRONY

Why is irony a problem? And why, from its emergence in Ancient Greece to the present, has irony been perceived as a political problem? If we take the simplest definitions of irony that date back to Cicero and Quintilian, where irony is saying something contrary to what is understood, then we begin to get a sense of irony's problematic and contested nature. The simplest and most stable forms of irony rely on the audience or hearer recognising that what the speaker says can *not* be what she means (Booth 1974; Muecke 1980; Searle 1994). And this is because in order to speak at all we have to share conventions and assumptions. A word does not have a meaning independent of its social exchange. We know a word is being used ironically when it seems out of place or unconventional.

Recognising irony, therefore, foregrounds the social, conventional and political aspects of language: that language is not just a logical system but relies on assumed norms and values.

If I say of a recently shamed, and long suspected, cabinet minister, 'True to the tradition of integrity and honesty that characterised his career, he defended his name until the end', then this statement will be read ironically if 'we' all know that the minister was anything but honest. Understanding something *other than what is said* does not rely on perceiving some private or hidden meaning behind my words; we understand if a word is being used ironically because of context. To use the word 'honest' in this case would be a bad move in a language game, or would not make sense, *unless* I were using the word 'honest' to show just how *dis*honest the minister is, how incongruous the word 'honest' is to describe such a *clearly recognised fraud*. Stable or simple cases of verbal irony tend to prove how shared and clearly recognisable our social norms and assumptions are. If we think of irony as primarily stable, or as exemplified by clear and simple cases, then we will also think of social and political life as primarily reciprocal, common, and operating from a basis of agreement. Complex, undecidable or insecure ironies, where we are not sure about sense, or where what is meant is not *clearly* recognisable, would then be regarded as special and marginal cases that deviate from the common ground of human understanding. Stable irony, with its process of obviously contradicting the conventions of a context and thereby signalling an opposite meaning, would be the ground from which less obvious or distinct cases might be explained. The norm would be a language of shared recognition and conventional exchange, a norm reinforced by the fact that for the most part we all know when someone is being ironic. The very fact that you can know that I mean something other than what I am saying shows that we have fixed conventions and that we seek reasons, such as irony, when those conventions are flouted.

By extension, in literary irony, it is because we assume that a recognised great writer *is great* that clumsy, unpalatable or inhuman expressions are assumed to be ironic. According to Wayne Booth irony does not just rely on shared social values; it also relies on literary value (Booth 1974, 193). Jonathan Swift (1667-1745) would not be a great author if we took his argument for cannibalism in *A Modest Proposal* (1729) as sincere (Swift 1984, 492-9). The speaker in the proposal suggests a perfectly rational method to deal with the hungry and overly populous poor of Ireland; their babies could be consumed and 'thus' the problem solved. Swift's text is 'clearly' ironic not just because its bigotry is excessive but also because it is bigoted; the very fact that its position is so objectionable forces us to read it as not saying what it appears to say. What makes the text great, according to Booth, is that it draws both on shared human values, insofar as we all abhor injustice, *and* shared literary values: a great text does not present blind, confused and incoherent dogma. *A Modest Proposal* is more satisfying if we assume that it is ironic: that it is critical of, or distanced from, the prejudiced incoherence it seems to mouth. We can assume a speaker is being ironic only if we share the same norms: Swift cannot *really mean* that it would be economically efficient to consume the poor. We also, according to Booth's account of irony, have to assume the value of textual coherence: it is because Swift expresses the argument in *A Modest Proposal* so clumsily-- the proposal is anything but modest-- that we assume he intended the text to be read ironically. Irony, for Booth, assumes a set of shared assumptions and the assumption of all communication: that we speak in order to be understood:

> It is always good, I have assumed, for two minds to meet in symbolic exchange; it is always good for an irony to be grasped when intended, always good for readers and authors to achieve understanding (though the understanding need not lead to mutual approval - that is another question entirely).

(Booth 1974,204-5)

If what I say seems not to make sense, then you might start to ask whether I were being ironic. Simple cases of irony therefore reveal something about the nature of communication: that we know what our words mean because we share contexts and conventions, along with the general expectation of sincerity and coherence.

DETERMINING IRONY THROUGH VALUE

From the earliest definitions of irony a distinction was made between a verbal and local irony, which was clearly contrary and delimited, and an extended figure of irony which pervades an entire speech, text or personality, such as the figure of Socrates. It is the first form of simple, stable and clearly recognisable irony that formed the basis of definitions and theories of irony from classical times to the eighteenth century, when irony was still defined in Samuel Johnson's (1709-84) dictionary of 1755 as a mode of speech in which the meaning is clearly contrary to the words. Johnson's example, 'Bolingbroke is a holy man', is not essentially ironic or ambiguous. To be read ironically we must know something about Bolingbroke. The fact that, for Johnson, he was obviously *not* holy allows the irony to confirm what we already know, and what we can safely assume as already known.

Recently, however, greater stress has been placed on irony that is undecidable and on modes of irony that challenge just how shared, common and stable our conventions and assumptions are. Many have argued that our entire epoch, as postmodern, is ironic (Eco 1992; Hassan 1987, 91-2; Hutcheon 1994; Mileur 1998; Sim 2002; Wilde 1980). We no longer share common values and assumptions, nor do we believe there is a truth or reason behind our values; we always speak and write provisionally, for we cannot be fully committed to what we say. Usually, this form of postmodern irony is argued to be inherently politically liberating; because no common ground is assumed, a life marked by irony remains open and undetermined (Handwerk 1985; Lang 1988). But the extension of irony from being a local 'trope' within an otherwise literal language to characterise life and language in general has also served clearly conservative political tendencies, tendencies that have closed literature off from its political and cultural forces. At the very least, irony is elitist: to say one thing and mean another, or to say something contrary to what is understood, relies on the possibility that those who are not enlightened or privy to the context will be excluded. We might be able to argue that irony is inherently ethical precisely because it prompts us to look at the communal nature of language (Handwerk 1985); but we can also say that it is conservative to assume that there simply is a community. How many readers, today, would find Johnson's example of irony, 'Bolingbroke is a holy man', so clearly ironic as to be exemplary? If we define irony as a *clearly recognised* figure of speech, then we need to question just how such communities of clear recognition are formed or assumed.

When the American New Critics of the 1940s used irony and paradox as the hallmark of literary and poetic discourse they did so by regarding the text as a self-contained organism. Poems are ironic because they take the words we use in everyday language and give them a richness of meaning. It is not by referring to the world and its conflicts that texts are ironic; the irony lies in the tensions of language. Wordsworth, for example, in the sonnet 'Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802', takes the worn-out metaphor of the city as a natural organism and re-injects it with life (Brooks 1947, 4). Everyday language thinks of life in terms of human bodies and daily action. By contrast, Wordsworth takes the present image of life, the city, and describes it in natural rather than urban terms. He does this by showing the city *not* when it is teeming with life-- during the day when it is filled with faceless crowds-- but in the solitude of morning: 'the very houses seem asleep / And all the mighty heart is lying still.' Here is the irony: the city is at its most *human* and alive when it can be described as deserted and asleep. For the New Critics, literary sensibility and irony rejuvenate an everyday language that has become worn out *because it is everyday* (unquestioning, lifeless and mechanical). Irony is essentially, avowedly and positively elitist: it works against common sense, the

unrefined intellect and the social use of language (rather than its reflection, complexity and tension). Cleanth Brooks quotes both T.S. Eliot and I.A. Richards to insist on the superior sensibility of the poet:

> the poet, the imaginative man, has his particular value in his superior power to reconcile the irrelevant or apparently warring elements of experience. As Eliot has put it, 'When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience, the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary' ... [Brooks goes on to quote Richards:] ... the ordinary man suppresses nine-tenths of his impulses, because he is incapable of managing them without confusion'
>
> (Brooks 1947, 42)

The history of irony's elitism goes back to its emergence in Greek thought. Not only was irony defined as an art in keeping with an urbane and elevated personality, it was also recognised as practised primarily in sites of political power. Irony, as a trope, is a means of effective persuasion in speeches and therefore already relies on the established speaking position and force of the orator. As a figure or extended mode of thought irony allows the speaker to remain 'above' what he says, allowing those members of his audience who share his urbanity to perceive the true sense of what is really meant. This sense of irony's necessary exclusiveness was reinforced in the twentieth century in *Fowler's Modern English Usage*: 'Irony is a form of utterance that postulates a double audience, consisting of one party that hearing shall hear and shall not understand, and another party that, when more is meant than meets the ear, is aware both of that more and of the outsiders' incomprehension' (Fowler 1968, 305).

Because of its ambivalent political history, perceived both as a force of liberation and as a mode of elitism, there have been recent attempts to move beyond or redefine irony. If irony *means* something other than what it says, then this will (according to its supporters) allow language to be liberated from a fixed and stable context. On the other hand, the idea of an *other meaning* refers irony back to some speaker or original intent, to ideas or a sense that lies outside language. Irony may well be tied up with the long history of Western subjectivism: the idea that behind language, actions, difference and communication there is a ground or subject to be expressed.

For Douglas Muecke, who wrote a book on irony just as 'deconstruction' was gaining a foothold as a discernible movement, the acceptance of texts as pure play without grounding sense would lead to the death of irony. He concluded his own book ironically by suggesting that the inability to deal with irony would prove just how empty deconstruction was:

> The establishment in recent years in both France and America of Deconstructionist criticism based on a view of writing as, in the words of Jacques Derrida, 'a structure cut off from any absolute responsibility or from consciousness as ultimate authority' ... will probably lead to a recognition of the decreased usefulness to literary criticism of the term 'irony.' It seems likely that the usefulness of the term will delay the establishment of Deconstructionism or some related movement.
>
> (Muecke 1982, 101)

Given that neither irony nor deconstruction have withered away we need to recognise the *problem* of irony. How can there be an *other* or ironical meaning if all we have are texts? For does not the very notion of 'meaning' demand that there is a sense or depth to a text, that there is more to a text than its surface? And if there *is* this other meaning, and we only know this meaning through what is said explicitly, just what is the nature and location of this meaning? If language is nothing more than a set of conventions and recognised uses, how do we recognise the difference between an ironic and a sincere use? Does the very thought of irony commit us to some linguistic stability and meaning, or

does irony problematise and disrupt meaning? It is this problem of discerning the difference between stable meaning with a secure sense, and merely quoted or mentioned words with no clear depth, that will be charted in the following chapters that examine the various theories and values of irony.