WEAVING AN IRONIC WEB. IRONY AS STRUCTURE IN
THE DUCHESS OF MALFI AND THE WHITE DEVIL

Josephine Bregazzi
Universidad Complutense de Madrid

ENCODING THE IRONIC WORLD

This paper which is part of a study of John Webster’s ironic discourse, deals specifically with the linguistic realizations of irony in his two tragedies, The duchess of Malfi and The White Devil. A brief introduction will recapitulate the principles upon which this approach to irony is based (cf. Bregazzi 1991a), and subsequent sections will deal with the most recurrent syntactical devices exploited by Webster for the articulation of irony. Although these are by no means the only devices used for the purposes of irony in the tragedies, the following has been chosen on account of their direct relevance to the nature of irony: Sentence Type: 1. Negation, 2. Interrogation, 3. The Imperative.

The evidence offered by these two tragedies will show that irony, far from being the nebulous "figure of speech" or "trope" that it has hitherto been considered to be, is in fact a communicative attitude that is perfectly codifiable within certain syntactic, lexical and semantic constructs.

INTRODUCTION

Irony has traditionally been considered a major "trope" or rhetorical figure, this definition perhaps based on an erroneous mingling of the purely formal and conceptual in classical rhetoric. However, the definition "irony as trope" totally fails to account for the fact that practically all other tropes can be used ironically. In this paper, the concept of irony will be based on four main points which are as follows:
a).- If irony can pervade the great majority of other categories of trope and rhetorical figure, then it is not so much a formal as a conceptual concern. In this paper, it will be taken as a psychological or communicative attitude to the subject matter of discourse. The attitude in question will not have the classical one of "not saying what you mean", but that of "avoiding saying what you feel" or an attitude of concealment. One can easily refute the "not saying what you mean" approach on the grounds that "what you mean" is made quite clear within the ironic interpretive process. To this end it is particularly interesting to examine those periods of literary history in which irony becomes the dominant mode, the early seventeenth century being an eloquent example. Although ironists have existed at all times, these periods tend to be ones of crisis in values, institutions and authority, periods in which it becomes difficult to totally reject older scales of values or to wholeheartedly accept new alternatives. Hence, this attitude of non-committal, and, according to the degree of freedom of expression, concealment, will become a predominant one in the literature of that period. I certainly think this is true of the literature written in England during Webster's time.

b).- Irony will invariably traffic in value-judgements, being as a result an ethical attitude. In ironic discourse, two or more disparate scales of values are juxtaposed, and a conclusion of either approval or rejection of one or both of these scales of values is drawn.

c).- To this end, irony will be an echo of those values within the socio-cultural context of which it is born. The echoing back will be reflected in some level of the linguistic structure in which it is articulated.

d).- The foregoing factors will condition the speaker-listener or writer-reader relationship in a very special way. On the one hand, if irony is fundamentally ethical in its attitude, then there must be a sharing of scales of values by speaker-writer and listener-reader for it to exist. Without this community of value-judgment, there can be no irony. Hence, irony is totally dependent on this relationship, and is, in Lacan's phrase, "dialogic". The relationship will therefore be one of complicity between speaker writer and listener reader, its success depending on what Austin termed the interpreter's
"uptake" of the ironic clues laid by the communicant, that is, his recognition of certain linguistic markers within the ironic utterance.

The logical conclusion to all this is that irony in fact has its own linguistic means of signalling its attitude. Obviously, this signalling will be more overtly noticeable in the spoken language, in which suprasegmental elements such as intonation, tone, timbre, volume, facial expression, gesture and posture all function as ironic "props". In the written languages, greater care is needed in structuring the text for correct interpretation, so that certain sentences types, certain syntactic sequences, lexical items, figures of speech or generic forms will be more suitable than others. What will be examined here are the special structures which Webster chooses for the creation of his ironic world.

SENTENCE TYPE

Negation

Negation has long been associated with ironic discourse. In fact, Kirkegaard considered that the ultimate definition of irony should be "absolute, infinite negativity". For Handwerk 3: "Negative irony is perhaps the fundamental variety, for negation lies at the basis of all interactive duality".

In view of what was stated with regard to the nature of irony in the introduction to this paper, the reason for the frequency of negative structures and sequences in ironic contexts may perhaps be explained by the underlying ambiguity of all negative statements: by negating one concept, its opposite is asserted. Horn 4 argues that the ambiguity of negation is not semantic, but pragmatic, this hypothesis being especially relevant to irony, for although the latter may formally negate or assert, it in fact does neither at the pragmatic level.

In English, negation is not restricted merely to the verb-negating element "not", but includes a whole series of pronoun forms, adverbs, intensifiers, negatively oriented prepositions, apart from lexical items with a high negative semantic content -verbs, nouns, adjectives, etc. Hence, these elements must also be borne in mind when examining the uses of "negation" in ironic discourse.
Negation in a work of literature may also be created through larger units than the mere insertion of an individual syntactic element of negation. In the case of drama, plot itself can create negativity in the reversal of characters' or audience-readers' expectations, although this type would belong to the domain of what is commonly known as "dramatic" or "situational" irony, as against the linguistic types which concern us here. Degrees of negation may be created progressively throughout a work, through the use of lexical taxonomies or intensifiers; another means of establishing these varying degrees could be through a preference for negatively oriented sentence structures or conditionals.

In the case of Webster, it is precisely to the way in which these degrees of negativity are progressively intensified through the exploitation of the linguistic elements mentioned above that particular attention must be given in both *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*. Webster moves progressively further from an initial affirmation of value (Lodovico's "O Democritus, thy gods/ That govern the whole world", and Antonio's account of model government at thy French court), through the intermediate stages of conditionals and lower degrees of negation to the formal negatives of the final scenes and hence to the ultimate negativity of death.

Perhaps the intermediate stages are of greatest interest to a study of irony, for they best illustrate the accumulative effects of negation in the tragedies and underline the characters' ironically unwitting confusion of values and ethical insecurity. Hence the frequency in the earlier stages of both plays of conditional sentences.

Now in pragmatic terms, conditionals are generally used to express unfulfilled wishes, to speculate, to compare "what is" with "what could or might be", each of these functions as we have seen being directly related to irony.

To this respect, one finds that conditionals are consistently used by those characters who are unsure of their position, or their relationship to their environment or to each other. The Duchess and Antonio hedge around each other with conditionals in their "courtship scene": "If I had a husband now, this care were quit", or Antonio's "were there no heaven nor hell I should be honest". Neither character is perfectly sure of his or her ground as they transgress the norms of social stratification. Similarly, conditionals also characterize Vittoria's speech as she cunningly equivocates with Monticelso in
the arraignment scene of III. ii. of *The White Devil*, whereas when faced with more imminent physical danger, she typically challenges that danger through syntactically negative forms, as at the end of the trial scene and in the death scene.

Her brother Flamineo has his own peculiar way of marking negativity: a continual coupling of one intensifying element and another thus intensified; one of these terms is usually negative in semantic content, the other positive, so that he offers combinations such as the following: "Wondrous discontented", "unwisely amorous", "wondrous proud", "monstrous steady", "frail reward", etc. It is the very disparity of collocation here that contaminates the positive elements with the negativity of the other, so that in context, many other apparently positive elements thus absorb negative connotations, as may be seen from the semantic metamorphoses undergone by many of the play’s images. It is also significant that Flamineo uses these positive-negative combinations when he is being cynical, whereas when he speaks in earnest, he reverts, like his sister, to formally negative structures.

Adversative co-ordinate structures as used in sententiae are closely related to conditionals in that they invariably imply their negative alternative (the "but it isn’t so" sequence), and appear as means of grading negativity in the tragedies especially when the ironic *primus inter ales* or character who constantly reminds the audience of the play’s ironies (Flamineo and Bosola) is confiding in the audience-reader as to the moral implications of actions or situations.

Lexical or connotative negativity is also carefully graded. This usually comes in the form of one character’s expounding of some concept to another. The form under which thus usually occurs is that of an accumulative catalogue, as in Flamineo’s thumbnail sketches of the ambassadors—which are merely humorously ironic previews of Monticelso’s diatribe against "whores", or in Antonio’s accounts to Delio of the Cardinal and Ferdinand, which presage the brothers’ haranguing of the duchess on the conduct of widows.

Formal negation is also used like conditionals for equivocation, yet this never occurs in the characters’ spoken discourse, but in letter-form. The ambiguous letters of both plays are in fact eloquent examples of the underlying ambiguity of all negation. The written medium in this case, as a more carefully studied and constructed form, will thus ironically confirm what the respective
letter-writers (Francisco and Ferdinand) have already unwittingly betrayed about themselves in their more spontaneous spoken utterances.

The irony of formal, or syntactic, negation in Webster will therefore derive from its use as "earnest" rejection of the censurable "realities" of the plays and, consequently, as reminders of the scales of values presented as "what should be" at the opening of each tragedy. In other words, Webster's negative structures function most conspicuously as assertions of their opposites.

INTERROGATION

Like negation, interrogation is also structurally relevant to the development of the ironies of Webster's tragedies, and makes an important contribution to their overall linguistic patterning.

Interrogatives are functionally appeals to the interlocutor to enter into dialogue with the speaker, to encounter him or her on a common ground of discourse, either by supplying new information or by confirming or rejecting information given at some prior stage. As no other syntactic structure, interrogatives create paths of communication in that they are open-ended and demand response. What, then, do we find in the only too frequent question-answer sequences in Webster's tragedies? Basically, that this essentially dialogic function of interrogation is not accomplished; Webster's characters constantly question each other about themselves and their relationships, yet they consistently fail to give or receive satisfactory answers. Bosola does not bother to answer Antonio's question "He hath denied thee some suit?" directly, but instead plunges into diatribe against the "Aragonian brothers". A similarly evasive reply is given to Brachiano's "Do you face me?" in Flamino's "O sir, I would not go before a politic enemy with my back towards him [...]". Small wonder then that Brachiano's ghost should not deign to answer any of the questions Flamino puts to it.

There are, however, significant exceptions to this pattern. One is when questions of identity are posed, for example in the exchange between the Duchess and Bosola. In these cases, the answer, albeit not what the inquirer would have wished for, is nevertheless the "truth" within the truth-system of the plays. The other exception is that of question and answer sequences between characters who are, as it were "in harmony" - a rare phenomenon indeed in
Webster's discordant world— as compared to the more frequent unanswered series between "disharmonious" or openly conflicting characters. Character affinity is thus marked by the success of the question-answer sequence. Flamineo and Vittoria are in this sense "in harmony" with each other when they both consciously act out Flamineo's feigned death, the whole sequence, although pretended, being thus communicatively felicitous. Delio and Antonio are likewise able to question and answer each other within the bonds of their friendship. Large interrogative sequences in both plays enact or symbolize these aspects. The arraignment scene of The White Devil is really an expanded metaphor of the question-answer structure. The Duchess of Malfi's death scene is in fact one long question-answer exchange with Bosola on the subject of identity. However, the most coherent answers are only supplied when the speaker is both inquirer and answerer at once, that is, when it is a case of self-questioning, as for example, in Bosola's "What thing is in this outward form of man/ To be beloved?" (D. M. II. i. 52) or Flamineo's "This night I'll know the utmost of my fate [...] (W. D. V. v. 116).

Interrogation, therefore, is an ironic structural device which on the one hand symbolizes the characters' basic lack of self-knowledge, their moral confusions, their search for understanding, and on the other morally classifies them. In the first case, the quest for self-knowledge is ironically blighted, as in the Duchess's "all our wit/ and reading brings us to a truer sense/ Of sorrow", the only feasible answer to the probing of self in a world whose realities must be negated.

THE IMPERATIVE

The imperative usually acts as the functional antithesis of interrogation in that it is a closed, self-contained mode of discourse that precludes the dialogically communicative bonds of the question-answer sequence. It obviously entails the imposition of the speaker's will on the listener's behaviour, directly or indirectly. Felicitous usage of the structure will, then, mean the corresponding modification of behaviour, the imperative as a result being the most important linguistic propagator of hierarchical relationships and power. If one of Webster's major concerns is the ironic portrayal of authority "as it is" in comparison to "what it should be", then the success or failure of the
imperative will be an important clue to how far the plays reflect a crisis in
authority or otherwise.

One of the most striking structural features in both *The White Devil*
and *The Duchess of Malfi* is their ritual or ceremonial patterning: formal trials,
divorces, pairing of characters in the functions of authorities, murderers,
physicians, etc., formal death-scenes, appointments to office, all of which imply
institution-binding agencies, or social cohesion. They are the public means
whereby authority asserts itself. Practically all spheres of authority are depicted
in these rituals: the state, the church, the family, even the arts and sciences,
each progressively revealed as either corrupt or ineffectual. At the linguistic
level, this discrediting of authority is stressed through some form of negation,
whereas the quest for alternatives is articulated through the interrogative
patterning. *Pari passu* with these forms, the imperative signals the effectiveness
or otherwise of each of the institutions or authorities, being at the same like a
moral gauge of power. Authority and the imperative, therefore, interact as
metaphors of each other, so that one may say that each of the three major
sentence-types mentioned here are pragmatic enactments of the plays’s three
chief concerns.

A close look at the diverse modes of imperative shows how they are
inextricably linked to the hierarchical relationships of the plays. Gasparo and
Antonio in I. i. of *The White Devil* are peers of Lodovico’s so that their
disguised imperatives to him to mend his ways are formulated through
exemplification of his misdemeanours. Yet, their enjoinders to repentance are
typically ineffectual, resulting in Lodovico’s “leave your painted comforts” (I.
i. 51-3).

This ineffectuality is next echoed at the top of the hierarchical scale
through the image of family breakdown in II. i. in which Francisco and
Monticelso endeavour to modify their brother-in-law, Brachiano’s behaviour.
Again, the attempt is futile and degenerates into open abuse between Francisco
and Brachiano, the "reconciliation" wrought by Giovanni’s entrance proving
spurious once Isabella and Brachiano are left alone. In fact, the two "divorce"
scenes are the epitome of breakdown in family authority, so that once more, the
imperatives of Francisco and Monticelso are, like Gasparo’s and Antonio’s, to
no avail.
The authority of the Law and its imperatives are next called into question. The reaction of the interlocutor to imperatives in this case is similar to those of Lodovico and Brachiano: refusal to accept this authority or, in this case, blatant defiance of same. Vittoria’s: "Die with these pills in your most cursed maws/ should bring you health or while you sit o’ the bench/ Let your spittle choke you" is a far cry from the modified behaviour that Ferdinand and Monticello had hoped for.

Curiously, it is always the interlocutor who responds, not by accordingly modifying his or her behaviour, but by returning imperative for imperative in defiance of authority. Ironically, the roles of authority-subordinate are reversed at the end of the play when Lodovico and Gasparo arraign "authority" in the person of Brachiano, or Vittoria and Zanche in that of Flamineo. Authority is thus doomed through the ineffectiveness of its imperatives.

The Duchess of Malfi exploits this use of the imperative in similar ways. Orders are usually needed only when some lucrative gain is at stake, as in the case of Bosola, yet when this is not the case, authority is once more challenged, defied, and refuted. However, the speech of two of the characters is marked in very different ways by their individual uses of imperative structures. These characters are the Duchess herself and her twin brother Ferdinand. Oddly enough, the Duchess’s "orders" are willingly obeyed by those whose behaviour she attempts to modify: she virtually "orders" Antonio to marry her, her maid never questions the "rightness" of what her mistresses tells her to do, and even Bosola implicitly obeys her wish to safeguard Antonio. Ferdinand’s imperatives, on the other hand, although they correspond to his position of political authority, mainly serve to illustrate his incapacity to communicate with others unless this be in his hierarchical status as Duke of Calabria. And even in this capacity, his imperatives are sometimes challenged.

Webster’s imperatives, then, are the ironic signals of the extent and depth of the crisis in authority reflected in his tragedies, and of the corresponding crisis in communication.
NOTES