

II. — *Homeric Wit and Humor.*

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WE may judge the literature of any period by the things at which it laughs; for a keen appreciation of the ludicrous side of life implies clear concepts. By this test let us examine the wit and humor of Homer to see whether it has reached clear conceptions, or is still in its childhood. We must not look for too much wit and humor in Homer. There is very little in Milton. The dignity and nobility of the epic forbid it. Stern sarcasm and bitter irony are here far more common than gentle humor and rollicking mirth.

Irony and sarcasm are used (*a*) in mocking another, (*b*) in exulting over a fallen foe, or (*c*) in spurring on a friend.

(*a*) Mockery is more effective than abuse. Even in abuse men, unless utterly blinded by passion, prefer to have some show of wit, for the abuse is more effective, if it is winged by a joke. Telemachus calls an assembly of the people that he may complain of the conduct of the suitors. During the meeting two eagles sent by Zeus swoop down from the mountain and circle above the assembly, flapping their wings. Halitherses, the seer, takes advantage of the portent to warn the suitors to desist from their lawless conduct, lest some evil befall them. Eurymachus replies sarcastically (*β* 178 ff.): "Come, old man, go home and prophesy to your children, lest perchance some evil befall them. In this I am a good deal better prophet than you." *i.e.* "If you do not stop prophesying as you did just now, I can surely prophesy evil for you and your children." For other examples of mockery, see *Δ* 7 ff., *I* 391 f., *II* 617 ff., *X* 13; *a* 391 f., *β* 325 ff., *ρ* 217 ff., 397 ff., 406 ff., *χ* 195 ff.

(*b*) The boasting of a warrior over a fallen foe is one of the devices by which the poet relieves the monotony of battle

scenes. When the warrior has conquered his foe, and his feelings rebound from the anxiety of the conflict, he often expresses his exultant joy in a witticism. Patroclus strikes Cebriones, who pitches headlong from his chariot "like a diver" (II 745 ff.): "Oh my! He's a very nimble man. How easily he turns somersaults! If he should happen to be on the fishy deep, he could feed many men by diving for oysters, this fellow here, leaping from the ship, even in stormy weather, as now on the plain he easily turns a somersault from his chariot. Surely, there are tumblers among the Trojans also." Polydamas drives his spear through Prothœnor and exults (Ξ 454 f.): "I think he will go down to Hades leaning (*σκηπτόμενον*) on my spear." *i.e.* "My spear will be his staff (*σκηπτρον*) to Hades." Cf. Δ 395, 452, N 374 ff., Ξ 470 ff., 479 ff.

(c) Irony and sarcasm are not always used against one's foes, but are of use in spurring on one's friends. Odysseus' staff will do very well for the common people, but for the chieftains some other goad is needed. In Γ 30 ff. Paris shrinks back at the sight of Menelaus. Hector chides him (46 ff.): "Can it be that such a man as you brought home from a distant land a sister-in-law of warriors? . . . Could you not await warlike Menelaus? You would find out what sort of a man he is, whose wife you have. Your cithara and the gifts of Aphrodite, your hair and beautiful form, will not help you; but the Trojans are altogether cowards, else you would ere this have put on a stone tunic (*i.e.* been stoned to death) for the evil you have wrought." In other words, "Your cithara will make a poor weapon, your hair a poor helmet, your beauty poor armor. A wooden overcoat is what you need." Cf. Δ 242 ff., 338 ff., 371 ff., 509 ff., Z 55 f., M 244 ff.

One of the ways by which irony is indicated or made stronger, is by the use of particles;—either intensive particles as *ῖ*, *θῖν*, and *δῖ*, or weakening particles as *πού*, *ποθί*, and *κέν* (cf. *οἶω*, *οἶομαι*).

Irony is the statement of the opposite of what is intended "with the design that its falsity or absurdity may be evident."

Whatever, then, strengthens the ironical statement, heightens the irony by making the contrast greater between the speaker's real view and his statement. "Brutus is an *honorable* man" is ironical. "So are they *all*, ALL honorable men" is still more ironical. In this way intensive particles serve to strengthen irony. η is often used ironically in Homer, either in questions implying feeling or in direct statements.

Achilles, from whom Agamemnon has taken Briseis, asks the messengers who are suing for a reconciliation (I 337 ff.): "What need have the Argives to fight against the Trojans? Why did Agamemnon collect a host and lead it hither? Was it not (η) on account of fair-haired Helen? The sons of Atreus are the only men in the world who love their wives, are they (η)?" *i.e.* "This war is to recover Helen, but I loved Briseis as well as Menelaus loved Helen."

Achilles, at the sight of Lycaon, whom he had once captured and sold away to Lemnos, exclaims (Φ 54 ff.): "Oh my! Verily a great miracle is this which I see. Surely (η) the Trojans whom I slew will rise again from the realms of darkness, just as this fellow came back from Lemnos."

Menelaus is about to spare Adrastus, and take him alive as a captive. Agamemnon runs up and chides him (Z 55 f.): "Why do you take such care of the men? The Trojans did you some great favor in your home, did they (η)?"

Antinous prays that the gods may not make Telemachus king of Ithaca. Telemachus treats this as a wish for his welfare (α 391 f.), — "Do you really (η) think it is the worst thing in the world to be king? It's not a bad thing at all." This is particularly ironical because Antinous desired above all things else to be king himself.

When Odysseus in the guise of a beggar reaches his home, Antinous objects that they have too many beggars already. Telemachus ironically assumes that Antinous is concerned for the preservation of their property, or is reluctant to give to a beggar what belongs to another (ρ 397 ff.): "Truly (η) you take good care of me as a father of his son; since you bid me drive the stranger by a harsh word from our hall. Heaven forbid. Take and give to him. I do not grudge it.

I urge it. Do not fear my mother or any one of the servants. But you have no such thought ; for you had much rather eat yourself than give to another." *πατὴρ ὧς* (397) adds to the irony ; for Antinous really wished to marry Penelope. The succession of short sentences (399-400) produces the impression that Telemachus is trying to overcome the reluctance of Antinous to giving ; and the irony is heightened by contrast, when he speaks out in good earnest in the last sentence. Antinous answers (406 ff.) : " If the suitors should all give him this much (picking up a stool), the house would be rid of him for three months." See the use of *ῆ* in A 229 ; B 229 ; Γ 46, 400 ; Δ 247 ; E 422 ; I 348 ; Π 745 ; Σ 358 ; Φ 485 ; β 325 ; δ 710 ; ν 418 ; ο 327 ; φ 98. In almost all the examples cited *ῆ* can be forcibly rendered in the form of a question implying feeling.

In much the same way *θῆν* is used in ironical sentences. Hera and Athena arm themselves and go forth to fight the Trojans ; but Zeus sends Iris from Ida and orders them back. When he returns to Olympus, they sit sulkily by themselves, and will not speak to him. He is in good humor and is very ready to tease them (Θ 447 ff.) : " Why are you so grieved, Athena and Hera ? Surely (*θῆν*) you have not tired yourselves out in battle slaughtering the Trojans."

When Thersites has been beaten by Odysseus, the Greeks say : " Of a truth (*θῆν*) his high spirit will hardly stir him up again to revile princes " (B 276 f.). Cf. N 620 ; Ξ 480.

These two particles (*ῆ* and *θῆν*) fill largely the place occupied by *δῆ* in the ironical sentences of Attic writers. The following may be cited as an example of the ironical use of *δῆ* in Homer. Idomeneus slays Othryoneus, who had promised to drive the Greeks from Troy, on condition that he have in marriage Priam's daughter Cassandra, without having to give bridal gifts. Idomeneus boasts over him (N 374 ff.) : " Othryoneus, I indeed (*δῆ*) count you the happiest man in the world, if you really will fulfil your promises to Priam, who promised you his daughter. We would promise this and fulfil our promise. We would bring from Argos, and give to you as your wife, the most comely of Agamemnon's

daughters, if you with us sack Troy. But come on (dragging him off by the foot), in order that at the ships we may come to an agreement about the marriage, for we are not stingy about bridal gifts." Cf. χ 195.

The converse of this use of intensive particles is the use of weaker particles. This gives to a sentence an ironical tinge by stating as doubtful that which the speaker looks upon as certain. $\Pi\omicron\upsilon$ is so used.

Achilles boasts over the dying Hector (X 331 ff.): "I suppose ($\pi\omicron\upsilon$) when you slew Patroclus you thought that you would be safe and had no fear of me."

Odysseus says to Eurymachus (σ 382 ff.): "I suppose ($\pi\omicron\upsilon$) you think you are great and mighty, since you associate with nobodies; but if Odysseus should come home, that doorway, though very broad, would be narrow for you as you fled out through the vestibule."

Agamemnon says to Achilles (A 178): "If you have great might, a goddess gave it to you, I suppose ($\pi\omicron\upsilon$)."

Cf. $\pi\omicron\upsilon$ E 473; β 320; Z 285 (Ameis-Hentze).

In N 630 $\pi\omicron\theta\iota$ is so used. Menelaus slays Peisander, and in a boastful speech addressed to the Trojans says: "Now you are eager to set fire to the ships and slay the Greek warriors; but I presume ($\pi\omicron\theta\iota$) you, though very impetuous, will stay your warlike course."

In A 139 $\kappa\acute{\epsilon}\nu$ gives the sarcastic tone: "He to whom I shall come will be angered, I think ($\kappa\acute{\epsilon}\nu$)."

$\delta\acute{\iota}\omega$ and $\delta\acute{\iota}\omicron\mu\alpha\iota$ (cf. $\omicron\pi\acute{\iota}\nu\omicron\varsigma$) are used in about the same way as $\pi\omicron\upsilon$.

Pulydamas, son of Panthous, drives his spear through Prothoënor and exults over him (Ξ 454 ff.): "I do not think ($\delta\acute{\iota}\omega$) that the spear of the son of Panthous flew in vain from his strong arm, but one of the Greeks got it in his flesh, and I think ($\delta\acute{\iota}\omega$) he will go down to Hades leaning upon it."

In E 644 ff., Tlepolemus says to Sarpedon whom he has met in battle: "I do not at all think ($\delta\acute{\iota}\omicron\mu\alpha\iota$) that your coming from Lycia will help the Trojans, even if you are mighty; but you will die at my hands." Sarpedon answers his $\delta\acute{\iota}\omicron\mu\alpha\iota$ with a confident $\phi\eta\mu\acute{\iota}$ (652): "I assure you that you shall meet death and fate at my hands."

The standing joke of the islanders of Ithaca was, after asking the stranger what ship brought him to their shores, to add, "For I do not at all suppose (*οἶμαι*) that you came hither by land (or "on foot" *πεζόν*)" (*α* 173; *ξ* 190; *π* 59, 224). Diomed wounds Aphrodite in the arm, and shouts after her (*E* 348 ff.): "Withdraw, daughter of Zeus, from war and combat. Is it not enough that you deceive feeble women? But if you are going to make a practice of coming to war, truly (*ἦ*) I think (*οἶω*) you will shudder even if you hear of it elsewhere." She flees to Olympus to her mother, who takes her in her arms and heals her wound. Athena, who had instigated Diomed to wound her, says, after a mock apology for what she is going to say, that Aphrodite has been trying to persuade some Grecian woman to run off with the Trojans, with whom Aphrodite is desperately in love, and while caressing the Grecian woman to persuade her, she has scratched her hand on a brooch.

Οἶω occurs in a scene which well illustrates the humor of the *Odyssey*. Odysseus, as yet in disguise, established himself as beggar on the threshold of his own house. Arnaeus the public beggar came up (*σ* 1 ff.). He was a glutton and a drunkard, a great hulk, but not strong or vigorous, nicknamed Irus ("Mr. Iris" in Ameis-Hentze) because he went on errands. He tried to drive Odysseus away: "Get out, old fellow, lest quickly I drag you out by the foot. The others bid me do it, but I nevertheless am ashamed; but up, lest you and I have a strife with fists also." To this very shame-faced fellow Odysseus replies with dignity that he is doing him no harm, and there is room enough for both; but warns Irus not to challenge him to a fight, lest "old man, though I am, I give you a bloody breast and lips. I should have everything to myself to-morrow, for you would not come back, I think (*οἶω*)."

This incenses Irus, who replies, "Oh my! The dirty pig's tongue runs like a wheel, like an old fish-wife's . . . but I would knock all his teeth out on the ground. . . . Get ready, that all these may witness the fight."

The quarrel attracted the attention of Antinous, and with

a merry laugh he declared to the suitors: "Never did anything like this happen before. What rare sport the gods brought to this house! The stranger and Irus are challenging one another to fight with fists. But let us quickly set them to fighting." The suitors are quite ready to take the good the gods afford them, and gather in a ring about the ragged beggars. Antinous proposes as a prize a sausage which is being roasted, and further stipulates that the victor shall be beggar there without a rival to dispute his claims. Odysseus, professing that he is a worn-out old man, who would not fight unless his needs compelled him, exacts from them an oath that they will keep their hands off, and not help Irus. Then he bared his broad shoulders and strong arms. Wonder seized the suitors, who said one to another, "Irus un-Irused will quickly come to grief and have himself to blame" (*Ἰρος ἄϊρος*, i.e. Irus without his brag and shamelessness will be no longer Irus). As for Irus, the flesh trembled on his limbs, and Antinous' threats of dire punishment if he was conquered did not serve to reassure him, but he trembled the more. When they squared off, Irus dealt Odysseus a harmless blow on the shoulder, but Odysseus dealt him a crushing blow on the neck under the ear. He fell bleating in the dust, and gnashed his teeth together as he kicked the earth with his feet, and the suitors, lifting up their hands, almost died of laughter (*γέλῳ ἔκθανον*).

Odysseus drags him out through the doorway by the foot, leans him up against the wall, and places a staff in his hand as badge of office, with the injunction, "Now sit there and keep away the dogs and pigs, and don't you, you sorry fellow, lord it over strangers and beggars, lest you get a taste of something worse yet." Odysseus returned to the threshold from which Irus had disturbed him, and the suitors with merry laughter returned to the hall. Cf. *οἶω*, Z 353; Φ 399; β 255; ν 180; *οἶομαι*, β 198.

Another form of irony is the use in a bad sense of words commonly associated with a pleasant meaning. *ἐπαυρίσκομαι*, "enjoy," is so used.

Helen says of Paris (Z 352 f.): "His mind is not dis-

creet, nor ever will be, wherefore I think (ὀίω) he will taste the fruits of it (ἐπαυρήσεσθαι)." Cf. A 410; O 17; σ 107. Parallel to this is the use of γεύομαι. Achilles says of Lycaon (Φ 60 f.), "He shall taste (γεύσεται) my spear-point."

Melantheus says, threateningly, to Odysseus (ν 180 f.): "I do not think (ὀίω) we shall separate before we get a taste (γεύσασθαι) of each other's fists." Cf. φ 98 and Milton, Par. Lost, II, 686, "Retire, or taste thy folly."

So γέρας, "gift of honor," and ξείνιον, "pledge of hospitality," both eminently respectable words, are found in bad company. Ctesippus says (ν 294 ff.) in regard to Odysseus: "It is not right nor just to treat ill the guests of Telemachus; but come, let me give him a pledge of hospitality (ξείνιον), that he also may give to the bathmaid or some other servant a gift of honor (γέρας)." With these words he hurls at him an ox's hoof. Later on (χ 285 ff.) Philoctetus, when he gives Ctesippus his death-blow, tells him: "This is a pledge of hospitality (ξεινήιον) in return for the hoof which you once gave Odysseus." For good words in a bad sense see also, πέσσω B 237; δόρπον φ 428; βέλτερον O 197; Φ 485; ζ 282; λώιον A 229.

Again, that which is feared is stated as if it was the desired object of the action. Achilles says to Hector (Τ 429): "Draw near that you may the quicker meet your death." Cf. A 515 f.; Z 143; Θ 18; Ξ 97 ff., 365; Φ 487 f.; δ 710; ν 418; ο 326 ff.

Sometimes the ironical speech ends in serious words, which heighten the irony by contrast. Helen says to Paris, who has just been vanquished in single combat by Menelaus (Γ 432 ff.): "Go now, challenge warlike Menelaus to fight again. But I advise you to cease and not to fight with Menelaus." Cf. δ 687 ff.; ρ 403; σ 355.

Homeric wit is objective. It has to do with external objects and is aimed at definite persons. This is due partly to the nature of the epic which is objective, presenting objects and letting them speak for themselves, partly also to the stage of development of thought at that time. Men dealt less with abstractions and more directly with objects themselves.

This explains the prevalence of irony. Schopenhauer says, "Irony is objective, that is, intended for another; but humor is subjective, that is, it primarily exists for one's own self. Accordingly, we find the masterpieces of irony among the ancients, but those of humor among the moderns." The Homeric gods and men do not laugh at subtle distinctions. The gods laughed at the awkward, hobbling Hephaestus (A 599 ff.) much as a child laughs at the awkward capers of its father when he dances for its amusement. When Thersites is beaten, the Greeks, somewhat as school-children when the master flogs another, burst into a merry laugh, and with comical exaggeration declare that, though the glorious achievements of Odysseus in the council and on the field of battle are countless, this far excels them all, that he has put a stop to the speeches of Thersites.

Eurymachus made sport of the bald head of Odysseus, and made all the suitors laugh (σ 350 ff.). He starts out as though he had some very important communication: "Hear me, ye suitors of the glorious queen, that I may tell the things which my heart in my breast bids me. Not without the will of the gods is this man come to the home of Odysseus. Still it seems to me there is a flash of torches from his head since there are no hairs on it, not even a few." Odysseus' bald head made a good reflector in the night. Of course the gods had sent him thither.

At the funeral games of Patroclus the Greeks burst into a merry laugh at Ajax, who slips in the filth where the oxen had been slain, and comes up sputtering with his mouth and nose full of it (Ψ 784).

On the other hand, Homer treated seriously many things which we should look upon as absurd. When Odysseus returned in safety from the home of Circe, his companions ran joyfully about him, as calves go skipping to meet their mothers (κ 410 ff.). Utterly unconscious of any burlesque, the poet compares (ν 24 ff.) Odysseus, who tosses from side to side and cannot sleep, with a sausage which a man turns this way and that, in roasting. Cf. α 215 f.; η 215 ff. (\omicron 344 f., ρ 286 ff., σ 53 f.).

Yet the Greeks were not void of a sense of humor. When Achilles had slain Hector, and the Achaeans came running up, each giving the body a blow, they said to one another with a grim humor in which the joke was on themselves (X 37 f.): "Oh my! Truly Hector is easier to handle than when he set fire to the ships." In Λ 558 ff. boys try to drive an ass from a field of grain. The boys beat him with clubs, and drive him out with difficulty, "when," as the poet adds, "he had got all he wanted." Cf. ι 445; μ 22, 303; ν 221 ff.

The pun on *Ὀδύτις*, "No man," which saves the life of Odysseus in the cave of Polyphemus (ι 366, 403 ff.) is familiar.

In ρ 414 ff. Odysseus comes up to Antinous begging, and gives what purports to be a story of his experiences. He tells how he went to Egypt (426), and was sent as a slave to Cyprus (442), from which place he came to Ithaca sorely plagued (*πήματα πρόσχων*). With a play on his closing words Antinous asks, "What divinity brought this plague (*τόδε πῆμα*) to us? Stand off, lest you quickly come to a bitter 'Egypt' and 'Cyprus.'" Compare with these puns *στήθεσι παμφαίνοντας* (Λ 100) for *τεύχεσι παμφαίνοντας*.

Aphrodite figures in a number of comical scenes. She has enough of the divinity to make us feel that any irreverence shown her has its comical side. Yet she is not such a stern divinity as to make such treatment of her impossible. Cf. Γ 399 ff.; E 348 ff.; Φ 416, 428 ff.; θ 266-366.

Demodocus, the Phaeacian bard, sang of the love of Ares and Aphrodite (θ 266-366). Hephaestus, the cunning workman, husband of Aphrodite, arranged above his bed invisible fetters, fine as a spider's web, which caught the lovers fast so that they could not move hand or foot. Hephaestus, who had gone away intentionally, now returned, and called the gods to witness the laughable sight. The goddesses modestly stayed away, but the gods came and laughed heartily at the scene. Apollo and Hermes indulge in broad joking. Apollo with a pompous use of titles addresses Hermes: "Hermes, son of Zeus, Guide, Giver of blessings, would you be willing to sleep in bed by golden Aphrodite, firm pressed in mighty fetters?" Hermes replies, "Oh, if this only might be!

Lord, Far-darter Apollo. Let thrice as many fetters hold us fast ; and let all you gods look on, and all the goddesses ; but may I sleep by golden Aphrodite." At this sally all the gods laugh except Poseidon, who intercedes and secures the release of the captives.

The Odyssey contains more humor than the Iliad. Priam voices the spirit of the Iliad in his prayer for Achilles, who has slain many of his sons (X 41 f.) : "Would that the gods loved him as I do. Quickly would he be food for dogs and vultures." The Iliad deals with weightier matters, the fortunes of a city ; and is a tragedy in which the city's defender is slain. The Odyssey is pervaded by a gentler tone. It deals with the fortunes of a single family ; and is more like a novel in which everything turns out well. Both Iliad and Odyssey show that Homer and the men of his time appreciated the laughable side of life ; and though their wit was not subtle, their laughter was "quenchless."

NOTE. The notes of Ameis-Hentze have been freely used in the preparation of this paper.