

What is wrong with irony?

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After re-reading *Three Guineas* I want to address a simply question: what kind of critical practice is (the use of) irony and how effective is it?

In *Three Guineas* and *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf's feminist and political critique is packaged in a witty and ironical way. She is not the only female intellectual of her generation who uses irony to articulate critique: Simone de Beauvoir in *Le deuxième sexe* is also quite good at it, and one finds it in Hannah Arendt's work as well. Why this similarity? My idea is that they feel the need to use irony to create distance in more than one way. In feminist critique not only the personal is political but the political often becomes personal as well. That is, *ad feminam* arguments were (and sometimes still are) quite common in response to female critical voices. Being aware of that, de Beauvoir, Arendt and Woolf use irony to deflect attacks on their person; and the other way around as well, being very clear about the addressees of their critique, they use irony to deflect the frontal or polemical directness of the critique. They also use irony to distance themselves from feelings of anger and exasperation; though one still senses the frustration, the ironic distancing enables them to articulate critical observations that are sometimes razor sharp. Finally, and maybe most importantly, the distancing by way of irony enables them to deflect the "blinding effect of power" (Woolf, note 16). Whereas earlier generations of critical feminist authors tend to be either earnest or polemical, underestimating the effect of power or blindly charging against it, these authors have found a way – through irony – to step aside and dissect the various ways power operates.

The paradoxical effect of this ironical distancing is an often insightful account of the personal or, rather, of the constitutive and reciprocal ties between the personal and the public, between private lives and experiences on the one hand, and public institutions, relations and events on the other. But of course the paradox isn't really a paradox: the ironical distancing makes the personal visible and allows these writers to reflect on the ties between the personal and the public. Throughout *Three Guineas* Woolf frames her discussion of war, fascism and patriarchy with details of biographies; in *Le deuxième sexe* de Beauvoir interlaces her critical analysis of western history and culture with insights in the psychology of heterosexual male–female relations; and Arendt's whole oeuvre is about the lived experience of the political.

Their clarification and detailing of the ties between the personal and the public is, in my view, what makes for the critical force and the originality of insight in these three authors. And irony seems to be an indispensable part of it. However, what has struck me over the years is that the response of students to the irony of these authors has often been negative. Both in philosophy and gender studies classes students typically find the irony heavy-handed, aggressive, over the top, sarcastic rather than ironic. That quite consistent response has raised the following questions I would like to discuss:

- Is irony a dated critical practice? I sometimes wonder whether the use of irony as a critical tool is typical of Woolf's, de Beauvoir's and Arendt's generation of

women intellectuals. They were in a similar position: famous and/or notorious authors and public intellectuals at a time when venting publicly a view as a woman was regarded as either daring or outrageous. Among contemporary female authors in philosophy or gender/feminist theory I never come across irony (maybe I'm reading the wrong authors?)

Don't we need the critical tool of irony anymore because the conditions have changed for the better for women intellectuals?

- If irony is not a dated critical tool, what and where is its effectiveness today?
- Isn't irony the perfect tool of immanent critique? The distancing of irony is not vertical; it is the creating of space for new perceptions in a horizontal plane.
- Is irony's lack of popularity due to its undermining rather than affirmative effect? Irony takes down without putting anything in its place (at least not obviously) – I tend to consider this a strength but maybe it is (also) a weakness?