

IRONY IN THE MEDIEVAL ROMANCE

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I

INTRODUCTION

For a Germanist to devote a book to the presence of irony in the medieval romance stands in need of justification nowadays, for both the hunt for irony in medieval literature and the very pre-occupation with it have called forth objections. There are some, like Batts,¹ who doubt the relevance of irony to medieval literature at all and protest against the anachronistic application of what is held to be a specifically modern mode to an earlier period (although in practice Batts himself uses the term which in theory he rejects).² Others fall back to another position and, like Kramer,³ deny irony to a German author such as Hartmann, but concede it to his predecessor Chrétien, thereby tacitly admitting the equally important point that irony was therefore employed in the romance from its beginnings at the hands of Chrétien. Others again are suspicious of the fashionable standing of irony in literary studies and unwilling to be taken in by a passing mode (Wells approves of a scholar's approach because he sees in it a welcome 'antidote to the current fashion for realism and irony').⁴ We may share this reluctance, but also recognise that a critical method need not be wrong just *because* it is currently practised. Elsewhere irony has deservedly fallen into disrepute when very real difficulties of interpretation can be swept aside with a reference to an underlying irony.⁵ To this kind of criticism the answer must be to learn the lesson from irony as a questioning mode by

¹ See Batts, *Humanitas*, p. 39. See also below, p. 14.

² E.g. *ibid.*, already on p. 40 ('the real irony of this situation') or p. 48.

³ Kramer, *Erzählerbemerkungen*, pp. 142ff., 152 and 180.

⁴ Wells, *YWMLS* 34 (1972), 508.

⁵ See Wehrli's criticism of P. W. Tax in his review in *ZfdPh* 82 (1963), 416, or the same point made repeatedly by Frappier in his criticism of F. X. Newman (ed.), *Meaning*, in *Amour*, pp. 61ff. (see especially pp. 64, 66 and 92).

not stopping short of such questions as: what precisely do we mean by irony? How can we recognise when it is being employed? What is its function in any given passage? By asking such questions we shall also avoid the disconcerting need to defend ourselves, like Cleanth Brooks,¹ against the charge of believing *all* poetry to be ironic or the equally embarrassing imputation that we actually prefer obscurity and ambiguity to clarity and simplicity.² Finally, although the argument about scholarly fashions can be inverted (Donoghue gives it as his 'impression that in recent years irony has lost some of its prestige'),³ even this can be made into a virtue if we see the distance this implies as increasing the chance of objectivity by allowing us to stand back from current polemics.

Each of these recently voiced objections can therefore be answered in theory or in practice. This makes it even more significant that, in isolation and in scattered observations, the theme of irony has played a more and more prominent part in critical evaluations of the romance. In the field of French literature Ménard has written at length on humour in the courtly romance and has discussed irony repeatedly,⁴ Haidu has analysed two of Chrétien's romances in the light of their comedy and irony,⁵ whilst Frappier, although rightly critical of any facile appeal to irony as an answer to our problems of interpretation, has many fine observations on the irony employed by Chrétien as the founding father of the new genre.⁶ In German literature it is Hartmann about whom opinions are still not settled (some deny him irony, whilst others, now in the majority, grant it him),⁷ but the position is much clearer with his two leading colleagues.

¹ *College English* 9 (1947/48), 231ff.

² See the salutary argument of Booth, *Fiction*, pp. 367ff., on this point.

³ In his review of Booth, *Irony*, in *TLS* (6 December 1974), p. 1358.

⁴ Ménard, *Rire*.

⁵ Haidu, *Distance*.

⁶ As one example for many cf. Frappier, *Amour*, p. 65, fn. 11: 'Qu'il y ait une part d'ironie dans le *Chevalier de la Charrette*, je n'en disconviens pas. Mais le point délicat est de déterminer la tonalité exacte de cette ironie.' On the irony employed in *Flamenca* see Lewent, *ZfrPh* 53 (1933), 60ff.

⁷ The first group of Hartmann scholars includes Kramer (see above, p. 1, fn. 3) but also Bumke, *Literaturbeziehungen*, p. 31 and Jackson, *Faith*, p. 58. In the second group I include Milnes, *GLL* 14 (1960/61), 241ff.; Sacker, *GR* 36 (1961), 5ff.; Cramer, *Euphorion* 60 (1966), 36f.; Ruh, *Epik*, pp. 115 and 132; Jackson in Owen (ed.), *Romance*, pp. 65ff., although this list could easily be lengthened.

Bumke's critical bibliography of work on Wolfram often uses the word irony¹ (even though the author apparently attaches little importance to this, since he does not include the word in his index), L. P. Johnson has written on dramatic irony in *Parzival*² and Nellmann's sketch of Wolfram's narrator is aware of the ironic implications of this theme.³ To judge by externals, irony has been most readily acknowledged in the case of Gottfried, for Borovski and Kunzer have written monographs on his use of irony,⁴ and Clausen's thesis on the narrator in *Tristan* gives a quarter of its space to the same subject.⁵ In English studies Chaucerian irony is no recent discovery,⁶ so that the appearance of a monograph on ambiguities, mainly of an ironic nature, in *Troilus and Criseyde*⁷ is hardly surprising. Even in the case of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, about which scholars seem to be reluctant to use the concept expressly, irony has certainly been discussed.⁸ These are only random examples, but there would be little point in adding to them, since scholarship is not a matter of democratic head-counting. Instead, I use this point to make it clear that irony has played a considerable part in recent work on the romance, that it is time to move on from isolated observations to the general question of the function of irony in the romance as a genre and that, whether it be blessed or cursed with the feature of modishness, this is a problem which amply repays sustained and concentrated analysis.

If our focus is to be concentrated we cannot avoid facing one of the questions mentioned above and saying what exactly we mean by the irony to be found in medieval literature. In other words, we cannot, as happened in a survey of Thomas Mann's irony,⁹ dispense with a working definition: this is a trick which can be played only once, and even then one may doubt whether

¹ Bumke, *Forschung*, pp. 72, 88, 96, 146, 298f., etc.

² Johnson, *Ironie*, pp. 133ff.

³ Nellmann, *Erzähltechnik*, see index under 'Ironie'.

⁴ Borovski, *Ironie*, and Kunzer, *Tristan*.

⁵ Clausen, *Erzähler*, pp. 152ff.

⁶ For an assessment of the present state of research on this question see Ramsey in Rowland (ed.), *Companion*, pp. 291ff.

⁷ Gordon, *Sorrow*.

⁸ E.g. by Clark, *MÆ* 40 (1971), 10ff.; Burrow, *Poetry*, pp. 41f.; Hunt, *FMLS* 12(1976), 1ff.

⁹ Heller, *Mann*, pp. 235ff.

it was successful. I have attempted a definition of medieval irony elsewhere,¹ suggesting that there are eight component features which I shall enumerate here in theoretical terms so as to provide the basis of the argument in the following chapters, without adducing the illustrative material quoted in my earlier article.

The simplest definition, occupying a traditional place in classical rhetoric, is to regard irony as a statement in which the real meaning is the opposite of the apparent meaning. Accordingly, Donatus defines the rhetorical trope *ironia* as *tropus per contrarium quod conatur ostendens*,² Isidore of Seville sees it in a similar light: *Ironia est sententia per pronuntiationem contrarium habens intellectum*,³ and both illustrate their definition by referring to derision through what appears to be praise, just as, to quote a vernacular example, Wolfram refers to the ugly Cundrie in *Parzival* as *diŕ gæbe trût* (314,6), where his context makes it clear that he means the opposite of what he says.⁴ Yet this definition, however traditional, is unsatisfactory as a total statement, since it says both too much and too little. Too much, because not every example of irony goes as far as meaning the opposite of what is said. Too little, because this definition would be equally applicable to lying.

Alternative definitions of rhetorical irony take account of such doubts by avoiding any extreme statement involving the term *contrarium*, common to Donatus and Isidore, and by suggesting that the real meaning merely diverges from the apparent meaning. Pompeius therefore substitutes *aliud* for *contrarium* (*ironia est, quotienscumque re vera aliud loquimur et aliud significamus in verbis*)⁵ and Isidore implicitly does the same when he classifies irony (in his sense of deriding through apparent praise) under rhetorical allegory, which he terms *alieniloquium*.⁶ The advantage of this slight change of definition is that whilst the word *aliud* or *alienum* can embrace the term *contrarium*, it need not necessarily imply that the meaning is the direct opposite of the statement and can

¹ See Green, *Alieniloquium*, pp. 119ff.

² *Ars*, p. 401.

³ *Etymologiae*, I 37, 23.

⁴ The epithet *gæbe* can hardly be applied straightforwardly to one who *was gevar den unglîche|die man dâ heizet bêâ schent* (313, 2f.) and Cundrie's appearance disqualifies her from being anyone's *trût* (313,30: *nîht nâch friundes minne ger*).

⁵ *Commentum*, p. 310.

⁶ *Etymologiae*, I 37, 22.

therefore cover other types of ironic obliqueness. Yet we pay a price for this gain since the definition, as it now stands, is applicable not merely to lying, but also to allegory (which is why Isidore can include irony under allegory). Before we can differentiate irony from these related phenomena, however, a number of further refinements of the definition are called for.

The first of these concerns the two levels on which an ironic statement can be understood, one on which the poet's real meaning is conveyed to, and understood by, the initiated and one on which his ostensible meaning is taken as the truth by the uninitiated. These different levels may be represented by different characters within the work, or they may be incorporated in different sections of the audience or in the same audience at different stages of their understanding of the work, or finally, by the distinction between poet and narrator. Because of the various ways in which these different levels of understanding may be built into the work it is unsatisfactory to confine this type of discrepancy, as does Fowler, to the audience alone when he talks of the double audience of an ironic utterance.¹ It is pressing the term 'audience' unjustifiably to say that a character in a work, making a statement which the audience recognises as unwittingly ironic, himself constitutes the uninitiated audience, and it is quite misleading to confuse the fallible or ignorant narrator with the audience. For these reasons we must exclude any specific reference to the audience alone, and suggest an element of withholding on the part of the poet, who may convey his real meaning to the initiated, but presents an apparent meaning to the uninitiated. But the withholding may affect a character, the audience or the narrator.

The next refinement consists in the suggestion that irony presupposes conscious intention (of a character in the work or of the poet) and cannot arise fortuitously. This might appear to be self-evident, but there are two features of medieval literature and the conditions in which it was created which could give rise to the appearance of irony where none was intended. The first

¹ Fowler, *Dictionary*, p. 295: '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.'

of these is the semantic ambivalence of so much medieval vocabulary,¹ for such ambivalence, like ambiguity of any kind, is a potential weapon in the armoury of irony, but we can only term it ironic when we are convinced that the ambivalence is not simply a given fact of the language concerned, but has been consciously exploited by the poet as part of his ironic intention. In short, we need to be persuaded that the ambiguity is not accidental, but has been purposely built into the episode by the poet. The same is true of a second feature of medieval literature, its traditionalist aspect or the way in which a work may be the result of a collective enterprise over the generations, so that different historical layers, representing different attitudes to the theme, will be incorporated in a work and create the illusion of a multiplicity of perspectives which need not be attributed to any one author as a conscious ironic intention. We can best exclude the danger of seeing irony where none was meant by asking after the degree of conscious artistry with which the poet imposes his view of things on the material handed down to him (where such independence is lacking it will be dangerous to assume the presence of irony). This means, however, that we must find a place for conscious intention in any definition of medieval irony.²

As the next step, we have to describe the relationship between the real meaning and the apparent meaning of the ironic statement as not merely divergent, but also as incongruous. This addition is called for because it is the unsuspected dissimilarity or contrast between one dimension and another which distinguishes irony from metaphor. The two figures are alike (and this is why we must consider metaphor in defining irony) in that both mean something different from what they actually say, but whereas metaphor emphasises the links between the two meanings,³ irony stresses what separates them.⁴ Whereas the real

¹ Cf. Hoffmann, *Semasia* I (1974), 37ff.

² To insist on conscious intention on the part of an author, and on our need to detect its presence, might seem to involve me in the intentional fallacy. I am less worried about this after the rigorous and salutary words of Hirsch, *Validity*, pp. 11ff.

³ Cf. Quintilian, *Institutio* VIII 6, 8: *metaphora brevior est similitudo*.

⁴ Lausberg, *Elemente*, §226, distinguishes in these terms between metaphor ('Krieger/Löwe': 'Verhältnis des Abbildes') and irony ('tapfer/feige': 'Verhältnis des Gegensatzes').

meaning of the metaphor parallels its ostensible meaning (the two are congruous), in irony their relationship is one of dissimilarity and contrast, sometimes, but not always, going as far as opposition (the two are incongruous).

This aspect of metaphor happens also to be true of allegory, so that the reference to incongruity in our definition of irony serves to distinguish it from allegory as well as metaphor. The two figures of irony and allegory have long been regarded as close to one another,¹ so that the etymology of *allegoria* (to say something other than what is meant) is equally true of irony. Irony and allegory, like irony and metaphor, both say one thing and mean another. But whereas allegory establishes a correspondence between statement and meaning, irony insinuates a contrast. The correspondences with which allegory works may be partial, involving no more than a comparison,² or total, suggesting identification (cf. the frequent use of *id est* in exegesis), just as the contrasts of irony may likewise be partial (*aliud. . . aliud*) or total (*per contrarium*). Even where the correspondence may be no more than partial it is on this that allegory concentrates to the exclusion of those features where differences obtain,³ whilst irony focuses on points of contrast and grants these a greater importance than any similarities. What is ignored by the allegorist can be seized upon by the ironist and adapted to very different ends.

At the first stage of our search for a definition (when looking at the provisional suggestion that the real meaning of an ironic statement is the opposite of the apparent meaning) I suggested, amongst the reasons for dissatisfaction with this common definition, that it made no distinction between irony and lying. To take account of this we must recognise that the divergence and incongruity lie between the 'real or intended' meaning and the 'apparent or pretended' meaning. By using such verbs as 'intend' and 'pretend' we draw attention once more to the purposeful activity

¹ Quintilian, *Institutio* VIII 6, 54-7, therefore classifies irony under allegory, whilst Pompeius, *Commentum*, p. 310, finds it necessary to clarify his definition of irony by showing how it differs from allegory.

² E.g. Gottfried's *Tristan* 16969: *der marmeline esterich|der ist der stæte gelich|an der grüene und an der veste*.

³ Thus Honorius Augustodunensis, *Expositio in cantica canticorum*, MPL 172, 148, can maintain *Leo Christum significat propter fortitudinem, quia vicit diabolum*, but also *Leo significat diabolum. . . propter saevitiam*.

of the ironic poet: it is he who consciously decides that his pretence shall be seen through and arranges through his choice of signals that this shall be possible. In this he differs from the hypocrite whose plan of deception may be scotched, against his wishes, by someone recognising his fabrication for what it is.¹ A more decisive point is made, however, by the distinction between the two verbs 'intend' and 'pretend'. An element of pretence is unavoidably present, since the ironist means something other than what he says and the pretence must be at least superficially plausible if some are to take it, for however short a time, as the speaker's true meaning.² But irony differs from hypocrisy in that the element of pretence shared by both should be accompanied, in the case of irony alone, by the poet's intention to destroy this pretence and negate the illusion by allowing the truth to be visible at the same time. In consciously letting the truth shine through the appearance of what he says the ironist resembles the allegorist and differs from the hypocrite, but in working with an incongruity between the truth and what he says he resembles the hypocrite and differs from the allegorist. The ironist leaves work for the audience to do; they must make his truth their own by reacting against what he appears to mean, so that his purpose in saying something other than what he means is not to deceive with a lie, but to awaken to a truth.³

We may round off our definition by extending it beyond *ironia* as a rhetorical figure, which is all we have considered so far. As we use the word irony today, we apply it not merely to a figure of speech, but also to a situation or action incongruously different from our expectations, as if in mockery of what things had seemed to promise. In other words, we acknowledge the irony of situation alongside rhetorical irony. Where the latter presupposes an ironist who so uses words as to allow us to share his view of things, the former involves a situation or outcome of events which implies no more than an observer. Knox⁴ has taught us that, apart from some odd exceptions, what we now call the

¹ Cf. Weinrich, *Linguistik*, p. 13.

² Without such pretence there would be no uninitiated as victims. Cf. Hass in Schaefer (ed.), *Ironie*, p. 59.

³ Cf. Birney, *PMLA* 54 (1939), 638.

⁴ Knox, *Word*.

irony of situation was not recognised as irony in English and hence designated by the term reserved for rhetorical irony until about the middle of the eighteenth century.¹ Even if this extension of the English word from rhetorical irony to the irony of situation took place only then, it is highly likely that some aspects of the irony of situation, although not designated by the term, were felt as such at an earlier date. Knox points in the direction where this can be illustrated, to the conception of a mythological or supernatural power as a cosmic mocker, behaving like an ironist in apparently saying one thing to man, but really meaning something quite different.²

Taking account of these separate points we arrive at a definition of irony which, for all its clumsiness, pays some regard to the complexity of the phenomenon:

Irony is a statement, or presentation of an action or situation, in which the real or intended meaning conveyed to the initiated intentionally diverges from, and is incongruous with, the apparent or pretended meaning presented to the uninitiated.

This is the definition with which I shall be working in the chapters that follow. As the steps of the argument have shown, this definition is meant to distinguish the concept irony from similar, but not identical modes of speech in medieval literature, it takes no account of various subcategories within irony (e.g. verbal irony and dramatic irony),³ which will instead be described in the relevant chapters. If it be objected that such terms for subcategories of irony are specifically modern and not to be found in rhetorical tradition, classical or medieval, my answer must be that the same is true of most of our critical terminology and conceptual apparatus, employed by us to ask questions of literary texts which were for the most part not even realised as possible questions at the time when these texts were composed. Apart from the most narrowly rhetorical interpretations of a medieval text by a modern scholar, we approach such a text nowadays with

¹ The semantic history of the corresponding word has not been investigated, to my knowledge, for any other language, but I see no reason why the position should be markedly different from that in English.

² We shall return to this problem later, under the heading of dramatic irony, pp. 277ff.

³ I have discussed these subcategories briefly in *Irony*, pp. 50ff.

quite different presuppositions from those of its author, so that it is from our modern intellectual needs that I draw my justification in categorising irony in a manner largely unknown to earlier rhetoric. The position here is hardly different from Knox's demonstration of the development of the specifically modern concept of the irony of situation: here too what we understand by this now can be illustrated from medieval literature even though the word *ironia* was not applied to these examples in the Middle Ages.

If the author of a book on irony cannot be absolved from defining this term, he may be forgiven not going into equal detail with related terms like comedy, humour, satire and parody, because of the immense scope of terms which go beyond literature and touch upon philosophical and psychological questions,¹ and also because Gaier, for example, needed more than a hundred pages to produce a provisional definition of satire,² after devoting three times as many pages to interpreting the term's implications in a number of works. Accordingly, I shall attempt only to sketch how I see the general border between irony and these other terms, recognising that it often shades off into a very indeterminate zone.

Whereas all these concepts presuppose a discrepancy between appearance and reality, comedy presents this discrepancy neutrally and free of any valuation, satire attacks this state of affairs, whilst humour grants a value to what it laughs at and shows a sympathetic understanding of human imperfections.³ If we wish to fit irony into this differentiation by Wiegand it will be to suggest that it shares a critical attitude with satire, but differs from this more aggressive and direct weapon by insinuating its point, hinting at what is not actually said.⁴ Parody I regard in the following pages as a stylistic form of irony, an exaggerated imitation of a style or genre in order to imply criticism,⁵ resting like irony on a discrepancy between ostensible meaning (a work

¹ Cf. Wehrli, *Literaturwissenschaft*, p. 87 and Fromm, *DVjs* 36 (1962), 322f.

² Gaier, *Satire*, pp. 329ff.

³ See Wiegand on 'Komische Dichtung' in Kohlschmidt and Mohr (edd.), *Reallexikon*, I 869.

⁴ See Allemann on 'Ironie', *ibid.*, I 756.

⁵ Cf. Allemann, *ibid.*, p. 757 and Muecke, *Compass*, p. 78.

in the genre imitated) and real meaning (a criticism of what is imitated).

How this tentative distinction between the various terms may work in practice can be shown with reference to Wehrli's essay on Wolfram's humour.¹ He starts by analysing the purely comic aspects of the scene of the three drops of blood in the snow (e.g. the correlation of hero with hawk or the automatism of Parzival's reverie, reminiscent of Bergson's definition of the comic, 'du mécanique plaqué sur du vivant').² But humour, irony and parody are also present in this episode. Wehrli sees humour, for example, in Wolfram's equipment of his narrative with various dimensions (in this case the way in which the scene opens out into the larger themes of love and the Grail),³ just as Mohr has likewise understood the relationship between Parzival and Gawan in the whole work in terms of humour.⁴ We pass on to irony, however, once we realise that in his remarks on the unexpectedness of King Arthur in a snowy landscape instead of his conventional spring-time setting the poet is implicitly ironising the conservative expectations of his listeners, whom he further mocks by disguising the fact that, despite this implicit criticism, he later mischievously follows the very tradition which he here rejects.⁵ Finally, the possibility of parody is introduced by Wolfram having as one of the targets of his irony his French source, for Chrétien's time-scheme had suffered from illogically introducing Arthur on every occasion at a Whitsun festival which came round again too swiftly to be credible.⁶ Thanks largely to Wehrli it is possible to identify comedy, humour, irony and parody in this one episode and in that process to see how in practice irony may be distinguished from cognate concepts.

As regards the particular romances I discuss in this book, I have unashamedly tackled my theme from a Germanist's point

¹ Wehrli, *Humor*, pp. 104ff.

² *Ibid.*, p. 106 (cf. also pp. 107 and 111). Bergson's definition comes from Bergson, *Rire*, p. 50.

³ Wehrli, *Humor*, pp. 109f. (see also p. 116).

⁴ Cf. Mohr, *Euphorion* 52(1958), 15f.

⁵ I am anticipating here, in a very compressed form, the argument which I develop below, pp. 40ff. Wehrli, *Humor*, p. 108, draws attention to yet another way in which the comedy of this scene opens out into irony.

⁶ See below, pp. 40f.

of view, but because I wish to illustrate that irony is latent in the genre as such and is not just to be found in this or that work I have used a comparative approach in trespassing upon other literatures, whilst recognising that if this method had been used by a French or English specialist the emphasis might have fallen quite differently. I have selected my romances primarily with an eye to their aesthetic quality and historical importance, and for this I make no apologies. This means that I include Chrétien's works as a matter of course,¹ but also the *Tristan* romance (Béroul and Thomas) as well as the Provençal *Flamenca*, chosen in preference to the Arthurian *Jaufre* in the hope that it demonstrates that the irony of love is not confined to *Tristan*. This choice of French works dictated the selection of German ones: the romances of Hartmann and Wolfram as successors of Chrétien, and of Gottfried as a representative of the *Tristan* tradition in Germany.² As English examples I have taken the leading example of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* (showing by that choice that I regard it still essentially as belonging to the romance tradition)³ and the anonymous *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Because of the late flourishing of the vernacular romance in English literature these last two examples come about two centuries later than the other works, but I hope to have made a virtue out of this chronological discrepancy if I have successfully shown that, no matter in what period or in what vernacular tradition, the medieval romance, as composed by poets of the first rank, was a genre eminently receptive to irony and that there are a number of recognisable reasons, aesthetic and sociological, why this should be so.

This should make it amply clear that my chief concern is with the romance genre, not with any particular representative, so that there is no sustained discussion of the function of irony in any one work, but at the most, at recurrent points, a discussion of

¹ Apart from *Guillaume d'Angleterre*, because of the uncertainty whether this work is really by Chrétien.

² With an occasional reference to Eilhart's *Tristrant*.

³ Cf. still Young, *PMLA* 53 (1938), 40ff., Lenaghan, *Clerk*, pp. 31ff. and Jordan, *YFS* 51(1974), 223ff. When Muscatine, *Chaucer*, p. 132, denies the term 'romance' to Chaucer's work because of what he calls 'the romance's entertainment of a univalent idealism' he is strangely forgetful of the realistic elements which he has himself traced in the genre of the romance (pp. 41ff.).

isolated passages. This method was forced upon me by what I regard as the primary necessity to establish the presence of irony in this genre from the beginning, to an extent and with a sophistication not true of all narrative literature. Only after this has been demonstrated for the genre as such can one justifiably take the further step of organising the problem round a particular author or work, asking then such questions as how Chrétien's use of irony differs from that of his German successors or how these German poets differ amongst themselves. But these are questions which must be answered elsewhere.