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Some Kinds of Ironic Blame-by-Praise: An Attempt to Classify

by WILLIAM FREEDMAN

“By far the most frequently used meaning of irony,” writes Norman Knox, “was, during the English classical period as during the preceding eighteen or nineteen centuries, ‘censure through counterfeited praise.’”1 Two out of every three appearances of irony in Knox’s abundant sampling utilized this meaning, and “So dominant was this sense that people sometimes assumed that if a device was referred to as irony it must necessarily be blame-by-praise, although it might in actuality be something else. . . . To blame-by-praise . . . was the central and dominant meaning of irony.”2

For all its importance, however, for all its dominance of the ironic field, both in the English classical age and before it, irony as blame-by-praise has yet to be adequately classified and analyzed. Knox himself devotes a major chapter of his book to “The Methods of Blame-By-Praise Associated with Irony,”3 and distinguishes eight such methods. Since Knox is interested in techniques rather than kinds, seven of the methods are merely means of achieving indirectly what one of them, “Direct praise,” accomplishes directly: ironic praise for virtuous qualities the target does not possess or for what are in fact blame-worthy qualities or vices. Only these two are isolated as what we might call types or classes of ironic blame-by-praise. D. C. Muecke, who also deals with problems of ironic classification, focuses more directly on the question of kinds and offers three. The first two—“Praise for desirable qualities known to be lacking” and “Praise for having undesirable qualities or for lacking desirable qualities”—are those Knox observes in his discussion of methods. The third, an important addition to the roster, is what Muecke calls “Inappropriate or irrelevant praise: as when vital principles being at stake, one praises an ecclesiastical measure for being convenient or economical or politically shrewd.”4

The literature on irony is voluminous and growing. Yet this is the best we have by way of classification of the form of irony that controlled the

field until at least the middle of the eighteenth century. The subject, I believe, is much more complex, the field more thickly planted (or mined) than we have noticed. Knox is surely correct when he remarks that much of the eighteenth-century satiric literature was blame-by-praise irony “employing very complicated techniques.” But because I do not think we have yet begun to recognize the extent or complexity of either the techniques or the kinds of blame-by-praise irony present in that literature, I find Knox somewhat sanguine when he remarks in a later review that “When Swift says pleasant things of an enemy, we know how to class his irony. . . .” We may know how to class it, but, at the very least, we do not yet know how to subclassify it. We may have identified it as blame-by-praise irony, but we have not determined which of the many categories of such irony it belongs to; nor have we situated it on a spectrum of satiric severity, interpreted its implications for speaker and audience, or said much more about it than even a Partridge, a Shadwell, or a Cibber might have discerned and determined for himself.

Blame-by-praise irony is indigenous to satire everywhere and in all literary periods. But for the sake of convenience and compactness I will limit my illustrations to the late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century satire in which it flourished. No theoretical problems, I believe, are involved in extrapolating beyond these chronological boundaries. In my search through this literature I have distinguished eight kinds or categories of blame-by-praise irony. Included among them are the three mentioned by Knox and Muecke, but I will discuss these as well, since I want to try to do more than merely identify them as strategies. The possibilities for classification and arrangement are many, and almost any grid imposed on the available data will smack of a certain arbitrariness. Still, a lack of inevitability is not synonymous with pointlessness, and I believe there is value in the classification system I propose.

I will try to place these eight strategies on a ladder of severity, beginning with the mildest form of ironic blame-by-praise and ending with the one that suggests the greatest degree of decadence, vice, or corruption in the target and in the society which breeds and nurtures him. The measurement of severity thus includes two basic components: the relationship or distance between the satirist and the subject of praise; and the implications of the utterance for the general state of the society’s values and (in some instances) of the language it employs to articulate them. The mildest form of blame-by-praise will therefore be one that suggests a relatively mild criticism of the satiric target and which implies that the satirist shares a relatively healthy set of values with his audience and society. The harshest will be one in which the satirist and the person or world he speaks both to and of are divided by a vast moral gulf and which suggests that the

moral system (and perhaps the language itself) is in a grievous state of decay.

1. *Quasi-ironic praise of genuine virtues.* When Pope, in “The Rape of the Lock,” repeatedly associates Belinda with the sun, identifying her, for example, as “the rival of his beams” (II, 3); when he praises her “awful Beauty that puts on all its arms” (I, 139); when he likens her to a “Goddess” (I, 132) who “smiled and all the world was gay” (II, 52) or who said “Let Spades be trumps! . . . and trumps they were” (III, 46), he is speaking with almost equal parts of candor and criticism. Belinda’s beauty is both real and awesome, the almost godlike power that flows from it equally genuine and enviable. Belinda is praised not for virtues she does not have, not for vices that parade as virtues, not for trivial or peripheral qualities, but for qualities she unmistakably has, and in imposing measure. The praise is for real and substantial virtues, then, and it is in significant part sincere. But it is a kind of blame-by-praise because it is also partially ironic. Belinda is praised for her beauty and her power, but she is teased or scolded for flaunting them excessively, for focusing on them too narrowly, and for subordinating to them too much that should matter more. Mock heroic deflation and affectionate admiration join in the image of Belinda as sun or goddess.

Pope’s portrait of Atticus (Addison) in his “Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot” is a comparable example. Addison is praised as

\[
\ldots \text{One whose fires}
\]
\[
\text{True Genius kindles, and fair Fame inspires;}
\]
\[
\text{Blest with each talent and each art to please,}
\]
\[
\text{And born to write, converse, and live with ease.} \ldots (193-96)
\]

This catalogue of genuine virtues is overbalanced by a spread of faults and weaknesses which Pope enumerates at greater length. When he concludes his portrait with the questions,

\[
\text{Who but must laugh, if such a man there be?}
\]
\[
\text{Who would not weep, if Atticus were he?} (213-14)
\]

he incorporates the praise into the broader yet qualified blame. Atticus’s vices are more regrettable still for the virtues they accompany, for belonging to a man of genuine parts. The praise is thus seriously intended but, as in the portrait of Belinda, it contributes to a larger satiric point and purpose. The praise of Belinda is itself only partially sincere, partially ironically exaggerated. The praise of Atticus is entirely sincere but given ironic import by juxtaposition with failings that are more lamentable for their attachment to such strengths. The point in both instances is to express pity for the failure of the satiric targets fully to measure up to the praise extended to them.

The virtues are real, the praise only partially ironic. The poet in both
examples speaks directly and in his own person. He is above his target but not entirely out of sympathy with him/her. Moreover, he assumes a shared set of values with his audience and, to a certain degree, even with Belinda's society. He expects them to recognize, if only they are pointed out, virtues as virtues, excesses as excesses, and vices as vices; all are agreed on the definitions of each and capable of recognizing them in action. Clearly, this is a mild form of blame-by-praise, one more appropriate to reformative than to punitive satire. It expresses a measure of fondness for its victim and, by the qualification of the attack, encourages the target to lower its defense and accept the curative blows that mingle with the affectionate strokes.

2. Praise for desirable qualities the target does not possess. This is the second of our categories, but the first of the three commonly recognized as a form of blame-by-praise. Examples are plentiful. In Book Two of *Gulliver's Travels*, Gulliver, in his conversation with the King of Brobdingnag, praises the British government, parliament, and economy for a variety of virtues we are evidently to understand they do not have. Gulliver describes, for instance, “that extraordinary care always taken of [the Peers'] . . . Education in Arts and Arms, to qualify them for being Counsellors born to the King and Kingdom . . . and to be Champions always ready for the Defence of their Prince and Country by their Valour, Conduct and Fidelity” (II, Chap. 6). Symmetrically, he praises the members of the House of Commons as “all principal Gentlemen, freely picked and culled out by the People themselves, for their great Abilities, and Love of their Country, to represent the Wisdom of the whole Nation.” He describes England’s Judges as “venerable Sages and Interpreters of the Law,” lauds the “prudent Management of our Treasury; the Valour and Achievements of our Forces by Sea and Land” (II, 6), and so forth.

Gulliver, of course, is serious in his praise of the English system at this early stage in his education. So, too, if we accept the “author” of the “Argument Against Abolishing Christianity” as a persona, is the Nominal Christian when he speaks of the “wonderful Productions of Wit” and of the “Genius” of the “Free-Thinkers, the Strong Reasoners, and the Men of Profound Learning” who thrive on raillery and invectives against religion. And so, of course, is Dr. Pangloss when he speaks of Leibniz’s pre-established harmony, plenum, and materia subtilis as “the most beautiful thing[s] in the world.” The Baron in Pope’s “Rape of the Lock,” on the other hand, speaks with unmistakable sarcasm when he laments the futility of the eloquence of the blustering Sir Plume, “Who speaks so well . . .” (IV, 132); as does Swift in the ironic title of his poem, “On a Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed.”

7. Or, following Maynard Mack, in one of his characteristic guises or personalities. Distinctions of this kind become critical for us only when—as is not the case here—the persona becomes an object of satiric attack.
In this form of blame-by-praise, the praise is no longer merely partially or contributively ironic, but completely so. And the praise is no longer for virtues in large measure present, but for those conspicuous and strident in their absence. The gap, therefore, between the satirist and his victim has widened considerably, and the effect assumes a punitive as well as a reformative cast, although the severity of the attack is mitigated by the absence or distance of a palpable vice. We are dealing here not so much or not so directly with present vices as with missing virtues, although of course the former is often implicit in the latter or hovering in the none too distant background. Whether the speaker is the satirist or a character in the work, he shares certain basic values with the audience and, presumably, with the society at large. There is no real question about what strengths and virtues, weaknesses and vices, are, only about how to identify their practice and practitioners. When the speaker is the satirist or a deliberate ironist like the Baron, he shares our sense of both. He knows that beauty and speaking well are desirable qualities, and he knows ugliness when he sees it, stammering inarticulateness when he hears it. When the speaker is not a conscious ironist but a target of the satire, he still has the decency and integrity to praise “Valour” and “Fidelity,” “Love of . . . Country,” “profound Learning,” “Wit,” and philosophical elegance and profundity. He is simply misinformed, foolish, or naive. Although the Nominal Christian may be an exception here, the speaker’s failing is typically intellectual rather than moral, even in his case more of obtuseness than malignancy. He is not yet a miscreant or villain, merely something of a naif or fool with a relatively proper sense of virtue and vice as abstractions or concepts, but a grievously defective capacity to distinguish them in practice.

3. Praise of present undesirable qualities or vices as though they are virtues. This is another of the forms of blame-by-praise most readily distinguished and most frequently remarked. Together with praise for absent virtues (#2), it constitutes what is often regarded as the full range of blame-by-praise irony.\footnote{This category is usually defined to include my own seventh type, which I have separated for reasons explained below.} Examples in the literature are easy to find. One of the most familiar is Gulliver’s famous paean upon gunpowder to the astonished King of Brobdingnag. Hoping to ingratiate himself with the looming monarch, Gulliver grows descriptively ebullient as he offers to assist him in the production of an invention that “would not only Destroy whole Ranks of an Army at once; but batter the strongest Walls to the Ground; sink down Ships with a thousand Men in each, to the Bottom of the Sea . . . divide Hundreds of Bodies in the Middle, and lay all Waste before [it] . . . .” (II, Chap. 7). Swift’s attack on Wolston in “Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift” is another case in point. Swift’s own poetry, satire, and sermons have been long forgotten, he indicates. Different taste
rules the town, and the bookseller Lintot, commending Wolston’s tracts
to the hypothetical buyer, lauds the free-thinking cleric as one who

. . . doth the Honour to his Gown,
By bravely running Priest-craft down:
He shews as sure as God’s in Glouc’ster,
That Jesus was a Grand Imposter:
That all his Miracles were Cheats,
Perform’d as Juglers do their Feats:
The Church had never such a Writer:
A Shame, he hath not got a Mitre! (291-98)

One further example should suffice. Although Cacambo is but a
character in Voltaire’s *Candide*, he clearly speaks for its author when,
with irony strong as Swift’s, he praises “The reverend fathers [who] own
the whole lot and the people nothing.” That, he adds cynically, is “what
I call a masterpiece of reason and justice. I don’t think I have ever seen
such godlike creatures as the reverend fathers” (Chap. 14).

The distance between the satirist and his target is wider here than in
either of the first two classes of blame-by-praise. There are no genuine
virtues here, and we have moved beyond mere commendation for absent
virtues to celebration of present vices. The wanted virtues lauded in the
preceding type are at times mentioned prior to or following the ironic
praise, at times merely implied by its blatant insincerity or implausibility.
Here the vices assume center stage; they are rolled out and paraded before
us in the act of paying them tribute. When the speaker is a persona,
Gulliver for example, he is guilty of a greater transgression than in the
praise of absent virtues and is therefore set at a further remove from the
satirist. The Gulliver who praises the “Valour, Conduct and Fidelity” of
the Peers or the “great Abilities” and patriotism of the members of the
House of Commons simply does not know what he is talking about. He
is the ignorant patriot peddling the propaganda he has purchased un-
examined. The Gulliver who praises the virtues and benefits of gun-
powder knows very well what he extolls; its capacity for massive devas-
tation is precisely what excites him and what he commends to the King.
This Gulliver, the kind of speaker (Lintot is another example) who di-
rectly and sincerely praises such wickedness, is no longer a mere ingenue
or fool; his sin is not informational but moral.

The satirist who employs this form of blame-by-praise, either in his
own person or through a targeted persona, still assumes a foundation of
shared values with his audience. There is agreement between them on the
nature of vice and virtue, and the reader is expected quickly to discern
deviations from the latter and exemplifications of the former when the
satirist displays them. But often, and I think in each of these three illustra-
tions, there is the beginning of a falling away. There is, perhaps in the very
blatancy of the laudation of wickedness and perversity, a suggestion that
the speaker candidly articulates what are in fact the suppressed assump-
tions or value of a significant portion of his audience and society. What Gulliver praises, almost all of us have praised or admired, if with an inhibiting layer of civilized reluctance and restraint. What Cacambo calls reason and justice is not substantially different from what too many of Voltaire’s readers had acclaimed with such accolades, though they may have chosen other examples and obscured the facts of the case with more hypocritical efficiency.

4. Praise for qualities that are desirable but that are trivial or contextually irrelevant. This is the third form of blame-by-praise mentioned by Muecke. It is what he calls, more economically, “Inappropriate or irrelevant praise.” His own example is Chaucer’s praise of the Prioress’s table manners, a virtue quite irrelevant to her ecclesiastical calling and one that points by its exclusivity to the absence of more important religious values. Comparable, if somewhat more bitter examples can be found in eighteenth-century satire. In Candide, for instance, Voltaire remarks wryly that “Those who have never seen two well-trained armies drawn up for battle, can have no idea of the beauty and brilliance of the display” (Chap. 3). When he follows this aesthetic appreciation with the observation that “The opening barrage destroyed about six-thousand men on each side,” the deflective triviality of the earlier remark, if it was not already clear, becomes manifest. Swift’s “Argument Against Abolishing Christianity” contains several examples of this kind of blame-by-praise irony; they are a principal vehicle of its point and satire. One of the Nominal Christian’s arguments for maintaining Christianity in some innocuous form is that “Notions about a superior Power [are] . . . of singular Use for the common People, as furnishing excellent Materials to keep Children quiet when they grow peevish, and providing Topicks for Amusement in a tedious Winter Night.” The object of the speaker’s commendation here is so petty and remote from the religious point that one might ignore or overlook the positive remnant. If one perceives pacification and amusement as abuses of religion or scripture, this no longer qualifies as praise for a genuinely desirable quality at all. But if one accepts them as legitimate if absurdly inconsequential benefits of Christianity, the speaker’s recommendation does bestow praise on a trivial benefit as a means of pointedly turning away from what Swift clearly regards as the more essential blessings of religious belief. A less debatable example from the “Argument” is the Nominal Christian’s tentative reflection that “in certain Tracts of Country, like what we call Parishes, there should be one Man at least, of Abilities to read and write,” namely the preacher who would otherwise be abolished with his religion. Here, as he often does, Swift penetrates a second target (illiteracy) on his way to the main one. And the efficacy of his secondary assault is contingent on the sincerity of his claim. There should indeed be at least one literate man in every parish. And while that is by no means a persuasive religious argument for the
preservation of Christianity, it is an observation that cannot be sweep­
ingly dismissed.

With this class of blame-by-praise, as in the first type, we are dealing
with praise of what are in fact desirable or appreciable qualities or effects,
though the irony here is a good deal sharper and less accepting. The vir­
tues themselves are generally less impressive than those attributed to
Belinda and Atticus. And even where they are not, they are chiefly
pointers rather than primary objects of attention. Belinda’s beauty may
be overshadowed by her vanity, Atticus’s talents by his cowardice and
pride; but in both instances their virtues are objects of separable and
respectful attention. In this present category, phenomena that are
predominantly deplorable (armies drawn up for battle, Nominal Chris­
tianity) are praised for genuine but tangential merits, principally in order
to focus attention on their profounder defects or infamies. The gulf be­
tween the satirist and the immediate target is wider here than in the first
type, varying in relation to the second and third. In a formal sense it is
narrower than in the praise of absent virtues or present vices, since here
some virtues, however minor or irrelevant, are acknowledged. The ques­
tion of felt distance, however, will vary from case to case; the formal dis­
tinction will, I think, prove less influential in determining distance than
the severity of the charge itself.

Where the speaker is a persona and himself a target (as I believe he
usually is in the “Argument”), he is attacked not so much for a moral fail­
ing, as Gulliver is in his praise of gunpowder, but for moral obtuseness,
his inability to see or respond to the greater moral force of the iniquity he
has overlooked in his attention to the trivial attraction. In this sense, the
persona or speaker-as-target stands midway between simple ignorance
(Gulliver lauding the virtues of members of Parliament) and blatant
moral callousness (Gulliver orgasmic over the annihilating potency of gun­
powder). Given the moral difference between ignoring wickedness in the
celebration of irrelevant beauties and celebrating the wickedness itself,
praise of present vices signals a wider gap between satirist and immediate
target than does praise of irrelevant virtues.

I have placed this form of blame-by-praise further along the spectrum
of severity because a substantial gulf has opened between the satirist and
his audience or the society at large. The implication of irony of this type,
as in these two illustrations and typically, is that there is something in the
reader and in his society that renders him susceptible to this sort of
frivolous or irrelevant appeal. The assumption is that he is sufficiently ob­
tuse, his moral sensibilities sufficiently blunted, to be appealed to in this
way, to be at least temporarily deflected from the deeper iniquities by the
superficial attractions dangled before him. Since the audience, I believe,
becomes in this kind of irony the satirist’s principal target, this seems to
me a harsher kind of irony than any discussed this far. Although it
acknowledges virtues as well as vices in its immediate target, its implica-
tions for the moral condition of the satirist’s world at large are graver.

5. **Praise of limited vices for not being worse.** This form of irony is relatively infrequent, but it can be used to excellent effect. Candide’s grateful rhapsody on the restraint of the Oreillons is an instance of the type. The cannibalistic Oreillons, preparing to skewer and consume Candide as a Jesuit, release him when they learn he is none and win his exuberant praise. “‘What grand people they are!’ he said, ‘What fine fellows! And what culture! . . . When all is said and done, there is a sterling goodness in unsophisticated Nature; for instead of eating me, these people behaved most politely as soon as they learnt that I was not a Jesuit’ ” (Chap. 16). Gulliver offers a more subdued and modest version of this kind of irony in a variation on what is generally referred to as the “ironic defense.” But there is a critical difference between this and ironic defense. Whereas the latter is an absurd defense of the indefensible—like the Hack’s *Modest Defense of the Proceedings of the Rabble in All Ages* in *A Tale of the Tub*—Gulliver’s, like Candide’s, is a pathetic defense of what should require none. In response to the Houyhnhnm Master’s accusation that Yahoos seem to exhibit a singular disposition to nastiness and dirt, Gulliver declares confidently that

I could have easily vindicated human Kind from the Imputation of Singularity upon the last Article, if there had been any Swine in that Country, (as unluckily for me there were not) which although it may be a sweeter Quadruped than a Yahoo, cannot I humbly conceive in Justice pretend to more Cleanliness; and so his Honour himself must have owned, if he had seen their filthy way of feeding, and their Custom of Wallowing and sleeping in the Mud. (IV, Chap. 7)

In these examples and in this kind of blame-by-praise irony, the speaker praises or defends the satiric target for an attribute that, in less degenerate times or circumstances, would not warrant either defense or praise. Candide rhapsodizes on the “sterling goodness” of the Oreillons as manifest in their having refrained from devouring him when they learned he was not a Jesuit. By doing so, he praises them not for a virtue certainly, not even for a demonstrated vice, but for the absence of unqualified depravity. Candide’s tribute is extended to a race that does not behave as cruelly or as indiscriminately as it might; ecstatic praise is offered for a mere restriction or limitation of vice. Gulliver offers another example of the type. His defense of the Yahoo derives from its maintaining a level of cleanliness superior to that of the swine. His remarks point to the actual filthiness of man as the second dirtiest animal as well as toward the still deeper pit we so gratifyingly avoid.

The speaker and subject are not of critical importance here. The speaker is not the author in either of my examples, but he is more an instrument than a target of the satire. His childlike naiveté allows him to express sincerely or enthusiastically what the satirist would remark more cynically. The effective difference between this and the kinds of satire we
have discussed previously is that (even more than the fourth) it relies on a presumption of advanced degeneration. Whether the immediate target is the society or human nature at large or—as in neither of these examples—a single individual, the gap between satirist and target is wider here than in the praise of present vices, real, absent or irrelevant virtues. For the ultimate target is the condition from which expectations arise. A new cynicism is introduced here, indicative of a state of turpitude so deep-seated and so widespread that any sign that we are less than utterly fetid or wicked is cause for celebration.

6. Ironic praise of named virtues set to corrupt or perverse ends. A good deal more blame-by-praise than we have realized occurs in the praising not of absent virtues or present vices, but, as we have seen in the first and fourth categories, in the ironic commendation of real or partially real virtues. Belinda’s beauty is also a named virtue pressed into corrupting service, but an important transformation has taken place here: the distinction between vice and virtue itself and of the language appropriate to each, has become blurred. A few illustrations should introduce the distinction my discussion will attempt to clarify.

*The Beggar’s Opera* makes extensive use of this kind of blame-by-praise. When Peachum expresses contempt for laziness and praises the “Industry” that has added to his stock (I, iii); and when he offers to soften the evidence against a whore because she is “very active and industrious” (I, ii), he is speaking of the activity and industriousness of prostitutes and thieves, the energy and diligence they bring to their sordid trades. When Mrs. Peachum exhorts a wilting pickpocket to “learn Valour” (I, vi), it is of course courage in the performance of his thievery she commends him to. Pope’s ironic praise of the “four guardian Virtues” who attend the throne of Dullness in Book One of *The Dunciad* bears a close family resemblance to the Peachums’ praise of industry and valor:

> In clouded Majesty here Dulness shone;  
> Four guardian Virtues, round, support her throne:  
> Fierce champion Fortitude, that knows no fears  
> Of hisses, blows, or want, or loss of ears:  
> Calm Temperance, whose blessings those partake  
> Who hunger, and who thirst for scribbling sake:  
> Prudence, whose glass presents th’ approaching jail:  
> Poetic Justice, with her lifted scale,  
> Where in nice balance, truth with gold she weighs,  
> And solid pudding against empty praise. (I, 45–54)

In a sense, four of the types discussed thus far come together here. The virtues praised in these examples are real virtues (#1, #4): hard work, courage, fortitude, temperance, and so forth. Since their abusive subordination is the focus of attention, the real virtue whose name and defining traits they continue to bear, i.e., the same virtue properly and laudably applied, is made conspicuous by its absence, and the target is praised at
once for a virtue he possesses and for one he manifestly lacks (#2). What he is in fact praised for is the employment of a potentially desirable quality in the service of an overriding vice: thievery, prostitution, and dullness. He is commended, in other words, for the more efficient performance of present vices (#3); and in the light of this, the virtue for which he is commended is trivialized (#4).

The satirist stands in roughly the same relation to the immediate object of his derision as he does in #2, #3, and #4, but his assumptions about the values of the audience and society have taken an even darker turn. An underlying assumption of this sort of blame-by-praise, I believe, is that the society to which the satirist and his audience belong has lost its will or capacity to distinguish the proper practice of virtues from their gross abuse. In the words of The Dunciad and The Beggar's Opera, dullness and corruption have become so all-encompassing that they have invaded the language and swallowed whatever strengths or merits we still possess. Language in such a world serves to disguise the malevolent purposes to which human abilities are turned, and those abilities themselves have been subsumed by the swarming miasma, adding to its mass. No serious damage is done to the term or conception of beauty when Belinda's is used in the service of vanity and adored beyond its worth. Both the terms and our notions of valor, industry, temperance, and prudence suffer substantial erosion when they are praised for their contributions to vice and dullness. In such a world, the very distinction between virtue and vice—not only the capacity of some to make that distinction—is dangerously in question.

7. Praise of vices that bear the names of virtues. This is an aspect or variant of #3, the praise of present vices, and is typically included in that category. But there is an important difference between the two. Here the vice is not only praised as though it were a virtue, it has absorbed the name of that virtue. This linguistic pollution represents a significant advance in the satirist's sense of the corruption of his target and society and consequently a substantial widening of the gulf between them. The Beggar's Opera derives much of its comedy and more of its satiric bite from its employment of this strategy. When Mrs. Peachum expresses fear for the "Honour of our Family" (I, vii) if Polly has married Macheath, it is the "honour" attendant on mercenary exploitation and lost with love and marriage that she speaks of. "Honour" keeps its name, but its source is no longer honesty or integrity of character, but the willingness and capacity shrewdly to exploit others to one's own advantage. When she laments the futility of the "Lectures of Morality" wasted on handsome daughters (I, viii), "morality" has become a synonym for predatory self-aggrandizement. And when she predicts, exultingly, that if Filch's life is not ended on a rope, he will be "a great Man in History" (I, vi), it is clear that our notions of greatness have undergone jarring revision. Although neither
Mrs. Peachum nor The Beggar’s Opera verbally define “great Man,” the ingredients are not far to seek. They are found in Jonathan Wild, where Fielding defines (or redefines) the term narrowly and explicitly. Much of the satire of this book, in fact, turns on this cynical redefinition. A “GREAT MAN,” as the narrator defines him and as the novel displays him, is “one of those who employ hands merely for their own use, without regard to the benefit of society” (I, Chap. 14). “The truest mark of GREATNESS is insatiability” (II, Chap. 1).

In this class of blame-by-praise irony, linguistic and moral corruption have proceeded at least one stage beyond that indicated by the preceding category. There virtues turned to vicious ends kept the names of virtues, but in part at least deservedly, since the qualities they described, whatever purposes they were put to, remain those associated with that virtue. “Industry” in the practice of thievery is dubious industry to be sure, but it retains its denotation as “assiduous effort or activity.” “Valour” in the performance of this same criminality is valor perverted and abused, but it remains denotatively synonymous with the admittedly admirable qualities of courage, boldness, and intrepidity. In the present class of ironic praise, we have progressed beyond the illicit subornation of otherwise positive attributes to the wholesale redefinition of vices as virtues. The activities or traits commended here maintain the names of virtues and thereby absorb their positive connotations. But they no longer exhibit any significant denotative similarity to the qualities whose names they have expropriated. Quite the contrary, they employ the attractive connotative screen to conceal the denotative inversion that has occurred or, where the redefinition is explicit, to make vice more saleable by wrapping it in virtue’s name.

As in each of the three preceding categories, the real target of such ironic praise is rarely if ever an individual, typically (perhaps always) the society at large. Since language is never a private but always a public instrument, a corruption of language—surely one of this shrillness and magnitude—signals a corruption in the public sector. A contamination of moral language—a confusion of vices and virtues and the application of the name of one to instances of the other—is a mark of deep corrosion in the value system of the society under attack. The implication of such linguistic pollution is that the principal difference between the literary world of the satire and the physical world it satirizes is that the former uses language honestly. This, implies the satirist, is what we really mean by and honor as “greatness”; this is the “morality” we teach and respect. In such a world, the distinction between vice and virtue is not merely threatened or blurred. Vice has become virtue, virtue vice or at least foolishness. We are on the brink of total degeneracy here; a short step will take us over.

8. Praise of vices that bear the names of vices. This is another branch of the praise of present vices class of blame-by-praise and another that is
more profitably distinguished from the simplest and commonest ex­emplifications of the type. This category, the last we will introduce, offers not merely praise of what we all recognize as vices, not praise of vices bearing the names of virtues, but vices brazenly parading in their own familiar apppellations and celebrated with matching boldness. Fielding offers us a simple example in Jonathan Wild. “This young lady,” writes the narrator of the whore Laetitia Snap, “among many other good ingredients, had three very predominant passions, to wit, vanity, wantonness, and avarice” (II, Chap. 3). In “MacFlecknoe,” Peri Bathous, and The Dunciad, Dryden and Pope elaborate the technique into the central strategy of the satire. The point of Peri Bathous, of course, is to recommend and teach the “Art of Sinking in Poetry,” the “Art of the Bathos, or Profound.” In the service of this lofty pedagogical objective, Pope ironically commends to would-be practitioners of the art a wide variety of “laudable” techniques and goals, all of which shamelessly bear the names that mark them: to “arrive at images . . . wonderfully low and unaccountable”; to “preserve a laudable prolixity”; to copy “the Imperfections and Blemishes of celebrated authors”; to “study . . . the Abuse of Speech”; and to practice and perfect the arts of “The Vulgar,” “The Infantine,” “The Inanity, or Nothingness,” and so on into the bathetic night (Chapters 6, 8, 9, 10, 11).

Dryden employs a mocked speaker, Flecknoe, to purvey his praise of named defects and abuses. It is Flecknoe in all earnest rather than Dryden in all sarcasm who glorifies Shadwell as one “Mature in dullness from his tender years . . . Who stands confirm’d in full stupidity . . . [The] last great Prophet of Tautology” (15–18, 30). In The Dunciad, Pope both speaks ironically in his own person and employs targeted speakers as he spreads the Empire of Dullness over all of Western Civilization. In Book One, Cibber offers a paean to the great Queen as “First in my care, and ever at my heart; / Dullness! whose good old cause I yet defend / With whom my Muse began, with whom shall end” (I, 164–66). In Book Three, Settle heralds Cibber as one in whom “All nonsense this, of old or modern date, / Shall . . . centre, from thee circulate” (III, 59–60). And in the final lines of the fourth and last book, Pope, hovering delicately between blunt despair and ironic contempt, cries out:

Lo! thy dread Empire CHAOS! is restored;
Light dies before thy uncreating word:
Thy hand, great Anarch! lets the curtain fall;
And universal Darkness buries All. (IV, 653–56)

This is praise of vice or darkness but with a vengeful difference. It is one thing, and bleak enough, to mistake ignorance for wisdom, villainy for virtue and to commend them accordingly. This is what Gulliver does when he praises the destructive power of gunpowder and sees its human cost only in the light of the presumed good of extending hegemony over an un-
willing adversary. It is a far more ominous thing to recognize villainy, stupidity, or evil for precisely what they are and to praise them in their name—as though Gulliver were to praise not gunpowder and its prodigious capabilities, but “mass murder” per se. It is the difference between the inability to recognize wickedness or stupidity for what they truly are and their willful acclamation for precisely that identity. We have come a long way beyond the traditional praise of undesirable qualities here. But it is difficult to know exactly where on our spectrum of ironies to situate this category. Since language remains untainted, there is less hypocrisy here than in the preceding type—indeed, there is a stunning honesty here. For the same reason, the intactness of axiological language, we are less certain of the cultural pervasiveness of the disease. It seems to vary from work to work or case to case. In “MacFlecknoe,” the “Realms of Nonsense” have their royal seat in Pissing Alley, extend from “near Bunhill . . . [to] distant Watling Street” (97—no very great distance), and have aspirations of empire “from Ireland . . . / To far Barbadoes . . . (139–40—no very populous region). The assumption that almost by definition attends instruction in the “Art of Sinking” is that a vast audience of amateurs awaits this professionalization of their trade—a point Pope makes explicit in the first chapter of *Peri Bathous*. And in *The Dunciad*, of course, the Dullness praised by a train of celebrants and disciples is the “great Anarch” who, having conquered the entire western world, “in universal Darkness buries All.” The range is quite wide, then, but in all but the narrowest imaginable cases (where the speaker is a manifest anomaly), there are grave implications for society at large. For although language itself has not been abused or mutated here, is not used perversely or deceptively, pejoratives have assumed the role of terms of approbation. The willingness, even of dullards, publicly and shamelessly to make honorifics of terms like Nonsense, Dullness, Bathos, and Inanity points to a general dulling of the public sensibility, to a substantial audience of responsive compatriots, or both.

At all events, there is a very wide gap between the satirist and his target in this kind of ironic praise. Where the target is the Dullard who, like Flecknoe or Cibber, is obtuse enough to celebrate Nonsense or Dullness with the unhesitating use of their own names, we are dealing with the final stages of either intellectual or moral degradation. If the speaker does not share his audience’s values, there can be no richer indication of his own imbecility than his eagerness to laud the vice in its undisguised form. If he does, they are mutual participants in a society whose contempt for traditional values and affinity for stupidity or wickedness can go no further. When the satirist speaks ironically in his own voice, he separates himself from such a society, but assumes the degradation as he speaks. In this world, vice has cast aside the homage to virtue hypocrisy implies. There is no need for a corruption of language in a universe dark as this, for the utter invisibility of virtue makes even lip service superfluous. Where the
decay of morals, intelligence, and decency is complete, stupidity and evil can announce themselves unashamed.

My classification of ironic blame-by-praise undoubtedly has its difficulties and limitations. Some may perceive the distinctions as excessively finicky. Others may be able to supply subcategories I have overlooked; on this great chain of ironies it is always theoretically and often empirically possible to insert additional species between the extant links. Some may wish to alter the hierarchy. But whatever the imperfections of the present schema, I hope it indicates that the house of ironic blame-by-praise has many more rooms than we had thought and that its residents have much to tell us about the relationship between satirist and target and about the satirist’s view of the world that creates, oppresses, and contains them.

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