

# [Criticism and correction: satire and praise in dryden, pope, and beyond](https://assignbuster.com/criticism-and-correction-satire-and-praise-in-dryden-pope-and-beyond/)

‘ The true end of satire is the amendment of vices by correction. And he who writes honestly is no more an enemy to the offender, than the physician to the patient, when he prescribes harsh remedies to an inveterate disease’

Satire is a difficult, protean genre and one that avoids rather than invites classification. John Dryden’s preface to Absalom and Achitophel is appealing, as by uniting ‘ satire’ under one common cause, his allegory offers a solution to this difficulty. Satire thus becomes a process of punishment and reward that serves as a remedy for social correction. Samuel Johnson famously describes the genre as ‘ a poem in which wickedness or folly is censured.’ This notion of censorship correlates with Dryden; satire becomes a judicial mode in which the boundaries between right and wrong are clear and vice is brought to light. As Dustin Griffin points out in Satire: a Critical Reintroduction, a view of satire as a genre in which ‘ The satirist …is quite certain of his own moral position’ (p35) dominates ‘ conventional satirist theory’; particularly within the writing of those theorists who published their works around the 1960s. In Northrop Frye’s Anatomy of Criticism, satire becomes a sphere in which ‘…moral norms are relatively clear,’ whilst for Alvin Kernan the satirist ‘ retains always his monolithic certainty.’ Yet certainty and satire do not easily go hand in hand; as Griffin illustrates, the ‘ best’ satire is full of ‘ complexity and ambiguity’ (p2) and comes in an ‘ incomprehensible’ range of forms. Thus, connecting its construction to a definable process of criticism and approval threatens to bring homogeny to the form or concretize a reader’s expectations of convention. Whilst Dryden may seek to provide a moral remedy with Absalom and Achitophel, the liveliness with which Pope fuses the classical and the contemporary in his Imitations of Horace, are more indicative of a playful sporting with the faults that he criticizes rather than a removed passing of judgment.

Dryden’s metaphor in which satire functions as a kind of process of diagnosis and correction is appealing as it provides a set of distinguishing features for an otherwise slippery genre. Just as the purging of a disease is followed by health, the ‘ amendment of vices by correction’ denotes a similarly methodical process in which criticism is followed by constructive praise. In his First Satire of the Second Book of Horace, Alexander Pope makes it clear that he is writing to a social purpose. The poem opens with a sly criticism of his readers, establishing a dynamic in which any offence caused by its content is more indicative of their inability to take criticism than of Pope’s virulence;

‘ There are (I scarce can think it, but am told) / There are to whom my Satire seems too bold. / Scarce wise Peter complaisant enough, / And something said of Chartres much too rough.’ (1-4)

Here, Pope does not make an apology for his writing as Dryden does but ridicules the reader who cannot stomach the ‘ bold[ness]’ of his verse. The notion of a written attack becoming ‘ too rough’ playfully connotes a physical attack and bestows cowardice to the reader who is too easily defeated. However, it is noticeable that Pope presents himself as an outsider of sorts; removed from the heat of direct conflict and responding to what he has ‘ heard.’ This step back is important; it signifies a reflective quality to his writing and removes his ‘ Satire’ from the viciousness of a lampoon. From this view, Kernan’s perception of the ‘ satirist’ as ‘…showing us the world and man as they actually are…’(Kernan p23) holds good stead and points to a view of Pope’s outlook as essentially moralistic. His satire thus becomes an uncomfortable yet necessary mode of assessment, denoting a fear of veracity in those ‘ to whom’ it ‘ seems too bold.’ The methodical process of composition suggested by Dryden’s allegory is made the more intriguing by Pope’s treatment of praise. Whilst Dryden positions praise as a necessary element of constructive criticism, line 21 of Pope’s First Satire of the Second Book of Horace indicates a more complex relationship between the two;

‘‘ Or if you needs must write, write Caesar’s praise; / You’ll gain at least a Knighthood or the Bays.’ (21-22)

Pope is being cynical about appropriate topics for poetic composition but his notion of undeserved praise is significant. Strikingly, the context of social elevation in which ‘ praise’ is placed distances the word from its meaning. Rather than denoting genuine ‘ approval, eulogy, laudation’ it is more indicative of calculated flattery. Here, Pope highlights a curious binary between criticism and commendation in which one relies on the other for a fullness of meaning. Just as the writing of ‘ praise’ alone becomes unauthentic and thus contradictory, pure criticism risks a descent into virulence. This suggests that for Pope, satire must strike a balance between the two if it is to be successful.

From this perspective, satire can be primarily understood as a moral mode. The correlation between criticism and instruction is made more interesting by a consideration of the original verse of Horace. In John Butt’s Twickenham Edition of Pope’s poetic works, his verse is printed, as it was in the original, side by side with Horace’s writing. The typography invites comparison between the two and calls for, as Fuchs suggests, a consideration both of their similarities and of their ‘ striking differences.’ In lines 62-65 of Horace’s poem, Trebatius warns the writer that his satire risks running him into trouble. Horace responds with the following;

‘ What! When Lucilius, first / to compose poems of this kind, dared to strip the skins / from those who dazzled all the men they walked among, / though filthy underneath.’ (p69)

Whilst Dryden’s presents satire as a means of correcting moral ill, Horace advocates a candid exhibition of the ‘ filth…’ that lies ‘ underneath’ and chooses to flay his subjects. However, despite the violence of Horace’s metaphor, at the heart of his line is a similar recognition of the moral boundaries indicated by Dryden. Here, Horace’s revelation of vice prepares the grounds for ‘ amendment.’ Satire then, can be understood as a mode of perception; a removal of ambiguity or adornment to reveal and review what lies beneath. Here the empty praise criticized by Pope in his first Imitation takes on a new significance, as it is exactly such emptiness of meaning that distorts clear perception and must therefore be stripped away.

Satire thus becomes understandable and distinguishable as a process that roots out what is bad and a heals with praise. A view of the satirist as one who, as Kernan puts it, ‘ sees the world as a battlefield between a definite, clearly understandable good which he represents and an equally clear-cut evil’ (p21-22) stimulates a degree of praise for the moral certainty of their perception. The clarity sought by Horace’s revelation of corruption is equally clear in its moral distinctions as virtue and vice exist in a similar binary to ‘ skin’ and ‘ filth.’ However, as Fuschs illuminates, Pope’s translation of Horace’s passage is unexpected and more localized in its diagnosis of vice;

‘ What? Arm’d for Virtue when I point the Pen, / Brand the bold front of shameless, guilty Men…’ (105 – 106)

Pope’s language is precise, the plosive ‘ point the pen’ and ‘ brand the bold’ creating a sharpness of tone that mirrors the sharpness of his perception. For Fuchs, this affirms the soundness and autonomy of Pope’s morals. Unlike ‘…Laureate Drydon Pimp and Fry’r…’ who are dismissed along with ‘ flatt’rers and Biggots,’ Pope’s is loyal to ‘ Virtue’ alone and retains his lucid perception. It is worth noting that in line 40 of his first Imitation, Pope’s rhymed iambic pentameter is interrupted by a lone eight syllable line; ‘ Ev’n those you touch not hate you’ (40) Pope’s verse is constructed with measured precision, and bitterness of this deviation is strikingly apparent. Here, as with Pope’s reference to the ‘ long Disease,’ of his ‘ Life’ in his Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot, satire becomes not just a moral form but a moral obligation. Kernan’s idea of a ‘ clear and consistent’ moral perspective seems particularly apt as it suggests that Pope both possesses an independent clarity of vision and is alienated in this perception. Pope’s satire may be less bloody-handed in its stripping bare of folly than that of Horace, but his awareness of clear moral boundaries and ability to judge the foibles of others appears suggests a similar, moral aim.

However, there is a danger that comes with the grouping of satire under a common goal or purpose as it risks homogenizing the genre and installing an expectation of clear conventions within its readers. In reducing Pope’s Imitations to a bi-parte structure of criticism and praise, there is risk of losing an appreciation of the complexity and playfulness that gives his verse its comedy. An understanding of Pope’s first Imitation or his Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot as devoid of comedy is surely mistaken. By this standard both poems become either homiletic or purely invective; attributes that question their place as satire. The same can be said for Dryden’s Absolam and Achitophel. If, Dryden’s poem is composed merely as a moral vehicle in which Charles II is critiqued and then praised through the figure of David, it fits better into the genre of allegory than it does satire. Thus, a strange situation is created in which Dryden’s process of ‘ amendment’ is both definitive and contradictory to his work.

The same issue stands with Pope’s Imitations and it is useful to examine the changing reception of his verse since its publication when dealing with this contradiction. In his 1815 ‘ Essay supplementary to the Preface,’ William Wordsworth writes of a kind of ‘ bewitch[ing]’ quality to Pope’s verse as it ‘ dazzled’ the nation with its ‘ polished style.’ The connotations of the dark arts evoked by Wordsworth suggest a kind of magic within Pope’s poetry next to which his moral message is secondary. It is this ‘ bewitch[ing]’ style that William Bond attacks in his 1728 The Progress of Dullness. He likens Pope’s compositions to ‘ Whip Syllabub’ rolling in the most ‘ seraphic emptiness.’Here, far from Kernan’s assertion of Pope’s moral certainty, Bond suggests a kind of immorality in the sumptuousness of his poetic composition. Bond’s criticism does little to pose against temptation as in condemning the ‘ frothy emptiness’ of Pope’s lines, he unwittingly praises the deliciousness of reading them.

The movement from an understanding of Pope’s verse as an indulgence with the power to corrupt, to the vehicle for just, moral thought suggested by Kernan is difficult to understand. On one hand, it denotes a change in the way in which Pope’s satirical verse is heard. Whilst Wordsworth and Bond are attuned to the music of his meter, for Kernan and perhaps for Frye, it has become a show of technical virtuosity that is more concerned with social reform than ‘ dazzl[ing]’ the ‘ nation’. This shift in reader interpretation is important as it serves as a reminder of the extent to which the satire constructed by Pope and by Dryden is temporally bound. Satire it a topical genre and thus its connotations change depending on the involvement of the reader with the subject of satire. Whilst Pope’s imitations of Horace demonstrate a recognition and perhaps an appreciation of the tradition of satire that precedes him, the very nature of imitation over translation demonstrates its time-bound significance. Despite his attempt to unify ‘ satire’ under one, common cause, Dryden’s method illustrates the impossibility of connecting them. Thus, a consideration of the distribution of praise exercised by Horace and later by Dryden and Pope does not join them in one generic process of composition, but rather shows the immense variety of the ways in which satire operates as a genre.

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