

Introduction

Isocrates and the Genealogy of Odious Praise

Busiris is the hero of this story. He's the legendary king of Egypt who slaughtered his guests at the altar of the gods and then ate them. He finally bit off more than he could chew when he tried to pull the same trick on Hercules. In this final encounter, as one Renaissance commentator remarked, he paid the price for his inhospitality.¹ Despite his many eccentricities, we can sympathize with Busiris, for he was in fact the inaugural victim of odious praise, an encomium pronounced by the sophist Polycrates, which we know only from Isocrates's attempts to redeem Busiris from the damage done to his reputation by the earlier encomium. In his oration, known simply as *Busiris*, Isocrates reproaches Polycrates for praising the king in such a way that he looks worse than if Polycrates had blamed him.

Isocrates's oration is intermittently concerned with the achievements of its eponymous subject but more nearly concerned with denouncing the ethical and artistic confusion of Polycrates's praise of Busiris. Addressing his rival, Isocrates insists, "although you claim to be defending Busiris, you have not only not freed him from the defamation that he is already facing, but you have even implicated him in such enormous crimes that no one could invent any more terrible. Others who have attempted to malign him have only slandered him for sacrificing the strangers that visited him. You even accuse him of cannibalism" (II.5).² In effect, Polycrates substitutes calumny for praise, which is an ethical and artistic confusion in violation of the very laws of praise (II.33). Polycrates's speech is less a defense or *ἀπολογία* than an admission of guilt or *ὁμολογία* (II.44). Worst

of all, he gives rhetoric a bad name, which it will endeavor to maintain indefinitely. His praise is so odious that it is a reproach to the teaching of eloquence (11.49). To recapitulate, in Isocrates's view, and we'll have to take his word for it, Polycrates's encomium of Busiris casts odium on the one who praises, the one who is praised, and the art of praise itself.

This sophistic dispute over the reputation of a mythological tyrant did not fail to leave its mark on the Latin grammatical tradition, especially in its engagement with Virgil's *Georgics*. At the outset of book 3 of his agricultural poem, Virgil invokes a series of mythological commonplaces, asking if there is anyone who has not heard of harsh Eurystheus, who imposed the labors of Hercules, or of the altars of unpraised Busiris: "quis aut Eurysthea durum / aut inlaudati nescit Busiridis aras?"³ In his philological miscellany entitled *Attic Nights*, the second-century Latin author Aulus Gellius reports that ancient grammarians were not pleased by Virgil's choice of the epithet *illaudatus* or "unpraised" to characterize so notorious a tyrant (and so precocious a violator of international law). This characterization struck the grammarians as something of an understatement, and they vented their grammatical indignation in hostile glosses on the offending passage from the *Georgics*. In rebuttal, Gellius argues that Virgil could not have used a harsher term than *illaudatus* since to be unpraised is the very limit of badness.⁴

The same epithet continued to provoke some resistance among Renaissance commentators, who usually gloss *illaudatus* with *illaudabilis* or "unworthy of praise." One commentator who devoted more ingenious attention to the problem was Pierio Valeriano, who considers various meanings of *illaudatus* before invoking the testimony of Isocrates's *Busiris* as a decisive intertext for the *Georgics*. Isocrates, Valeriano reminds us, criticized his rival for making Busiris seem even more worthy of odium by virtue of his praise: "But among all these interpretations [of the epithet *illaudatus*], the best seems to be the speech of Isocrates saying that the person who had attempted to praise Busiris only managed to make him seem more odious and blameworthy through his praise."⁵ In other words, Virgil called Busiris *illaudatus* because, as we know from Isocrates, even his praise turns to blame. You can't praise him even if you want to, for the more you praise him, the worse he seems. This paradox, we may add, did not prevent Isocrates from writing his own alternative praise of Busiris as the legendary founder of Egypt and its venerable traditions. It seems that, for the grammatical tradition so hastily summarized here, Busiris represents something of a limit case for epideictic rhetoric or the rhetoric of praise and blame.

His notoriety raises the question of what lies beyond praise. Is anything or anyone so universally abhorred as to remain immune to praise? Similarly, are there any universal values, shared by all orators and all audiences, or only relative ones? Moreover, keeping in mind Gellius's argument that *illaudatus* marks the limit or *fnis* of immorality, how does praise define or set the boundaries of the normative values of society? What if praise transgresses the confines of social consensus?

The praise for which Isocrates reproached Polycrates is an interesting test of social consensus. Everyone agrees that cannibalism is wrong, except for those who disagree, like Michel de Montaigne in his essay "Des Cannibales." Already in antiquity, Petronius imagined a scenario that might inspire some reevaluation of cannibalism. In the final episode of his fragmentary novel the *Satyricon*, Petronius has his picaresque hero Eumolpus pose as a rich old man without family in order to live at the expense of the *captatores* or legacy hunters who are drawn by the lure of his supposed wealth and frailty. This *tragoedia* or imposture can only last so long before the *captatores* grow restless, and, in the final numbered section of the text, one of Eumolpus's accomplices admonishes him that their luck is running out. The text then offers what must be an excerpt from Eumolpus's will that specifies under what conditions his heirs will be able to claim their share of the inheritance: they will have to eat his dead body in public before witnesses.⁶ We all know, proclaims the will in a brilliant parody of sophistic ethnology, that there are peoples who conserve the custom of eating the remains of their dead relatives so that sometimes those who get sick before they die are accused of spoiling the meat.⁷ Therefore, exhorts the testator, go ahead and eat my body with as good a will as you used to curse my spirit. At this point, greed seems to overwhelm the social stigma against cannibalism, and one of the obliging heirs steps forward to earn his portion. His name? Gorgias, a not so subtle tribute to the legacy of sophistic rhetoric, a legacy that Petronius found more than palatable. The last excerpt of the text cites some famous instances of cannibalism, presumably to whet the appetite of the *captatores*. Some of these examples reappear in Montaigne's essay on cannibals, such as the Saguntines, who, when besieged by Hannibal, ate human flesh, even though, Petronius reminds us, they didn't have an inheritance to look forward to.⁸ These examples from Polycrates, Petronius, and others suggest that even such a universally reviled practice as cannibalism is not immune to praise. What then can be *illaudatus*?

One of the most interesting testimonies to the power of odious praise can be found in a very prominent work of vernacular prose from the late

sixteenth century, *Les six livres de la République* by Jean Bodin. Book 4, chapter 7 of this masterpiece of political philosophy begins with an axiom: faction and sedition are bad for every kind of republic. If we are going to praise sedition, faction, and civil war, Bodin asks, what's next? Should we praise disease like the sophist Favorinus of Arles? Such perverse praise would confound good and evil, profit and loss, vice and virtue; in short, it would mix fire and water, heaven and earth.⁹ Such a mixture is known as chaos, the original state of matter evoked in the opening lines of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Bodin's vision of chaos reveals the potency of odious praise, which threatens our sense of order and coherence. Odious praise can turn everything upside down. At the same time, it can highlight the uncomfortable proximity of *le bien* and *le mal*, as if to remind us of how arbitrary our moral values really are. No system of values is safe from odious praise.

If praise can be odious, so can neologism. So I will hasten to point out that I didn't make up the expression "odious praise." I found it in a sonnet by the French Renaissance lyric poet Joachim Du Bellay. In sonnet 143 of *Les Regrets et autres œuvres poétiques* from 1558, the poet claims to choose encomium over satire. He would rather flatter than antagonize in verse, since even praise is often odious: "Veü que le loüer mesme est souvent odieux" (v. 14).¹⁰ How can praise be odious? As we have seen, praise can be odious when it is a disguise for blame. It can also provoke hatred through envy. The odious potential of praise was already well recognized in antiquity, as Laurent Pernot reminds us in his recent primer on epideictic rhetoric, where he invokes the tradition of "figured speech," in which "the orator uses false pretenses to disguise his real intent, or speaks obliquely in order to get to his point indirectly."¹¹ Pernot quotes an interesting example from the beginning of Pliny the Younger's *Panegyric* of Emperor Trajan, where the panegyrist says that the risk he runs is not the danger of underpraising a conceited tyrant but rather the indiscretion of overpraising a modest and clement ruler. Trajan's panegyrist need not fear that when he speaks of *humanitas*, his audience will understand *superbia*, or when he speaks of *frugalitas*, they will think he means *luxuria*, or when he says *clementia*, they will hear *crudelitas*, and so forth (*Panegyricus* 3.4). This elaborate prologue suggests the possibility of a kind of code of ironic epideictic, where each virtue stands for its corresponding vice and praise has to excuse itself. Under the rubric of "the psychopathology of the encomium," Pernot marshals further examples that bring us closer to Du Bellay's vernacular usage. From Euripides, he retrieves two characteristic and, in some respects, aphoristic sentences: "for indeed to praise too much is hateful" and "when the

good are praised, in some fashion they hate their praisers if they praise to excess.”¹² Another example, and for the Renaissance a more familiar one, comes from Lucian’s *How to Write History*, which warns inept encomiasts how little their efforts will profit them, for “those they praise hate them.”¹³ Thus, by the time Du Bellay wrote that praise is often odious, his claim, though paradoxical, was something of a commonplace.

I propose to revise this commonplace slightly and to focus not on vindictive or defamatory praise but on something more unsettling, something that is less personal and more institutional in its scope. In this study, “odious praise” is understood to encompass the uses of praise that challenge the constituent elements of collective identity, such as the ethical, cultural, and spiritual values shared by the members of a community. Understood in this admittedly broad sense, odious praise can be a tool of analysis and an antidote to all forms of chauvinism. If we reflect with Montaigne on how our cultural identity inhibits our critical faculties, we may come to appreciate the therapeutic effects of odious praise. In his essay on custom, Montaigne explains how custom invades conscience and makes us applaud our own conformity to society’s values. “The laws of conscience, which we say are born of nature, are born of custom. Each man, holding in inward veneration the opinions and behavior approved and accepted around him, cannot break loose from them without remorse, or apply himself to them without self-satisfaction.”¹⁴ When we venerate the ambient values of our society, “the opinions and behavior approved and accepted around us,” we affirm our collective identity, and this identity is what Montaigne calls later in the same essay a prejudice or “violent prejudice” (84). In its adversarial relationship to collective identity, odious praise can help to overcome this prejudice.

Before we investigate how praise can undermine the normative values of society, I suppose we ought to acknowledge the more conventional assumption that praise reinforces those values. This view achieved renewed prominence in an article coauthored by Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, which formed the nucleus of their frequently reedited treatise on argumentation known as *La nouvelle rhétorique*.¹⁵ Here the authors insist that the epideictic genre of rhetoric deals with value judgments and seeks to reinforce adhesion to consensus values in society rather than simply to display the virtuosity of the orator.¹⁶ They fear that Aristotle may not have grasped this dimension of epideictic, but Barbara Cassin dismisses this apprehension in her own discussion of how praise can create as well as conserve social values.¹⁷ For the Renaissance, John O’Malley

reminds us that “epideictic is ‘dogmatic’ oratory. That is to say, it assumes agreement on the point at issue, and its purpose is to arouse deeper appreciation for an accepted viewpoint.”¹⁸ Virginia Cox sums up a venerable and authoritative tradition when she contrasts epideictic with the other two genres: “Demonstrative oratory, by contrast—something of a poor relation in the ancient world, though of signal importance in the less politicized rhetoric of later times—is exercised in celebratory contexts such as funerals and the opening of games and serves the end rather of ritually enforcing collective values than of swaying an audience to a practical decision.”¹⁹ Though we may doubt whether rhetoric has grown less politicized, this ritual enforcement of consensus values seems to be the task assigned to praise in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* and in the long tradition that it has sponsored in Western thought.

Book I, chapter 9 of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* reviews the topics of praise and blame and offers a classification of the virtues that overlaps with their treatment in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.²⁰ At first glance, the topics of praise seem to be the same as the topics of ethics, making praise an instrument of ethical training. However, when in the course of his chapter Aristotle explains how the orator can best use these topics to his advantage, the discussion veers into the territory of the sophists and may even help us to theorize odious praise. Here Aristotle exploits the proximity of vice and virtue in order to teach us how to praise a weakness as a strength or conversely, to blame a strength as a weakness. For instance, we can call the angry man “straightforward” (ἀπλοῦν) and the arrogant “high-minded” (μεγαλοπρεπῆ), or the rash “courageous” and the spendthrift “liberal” (1367a32–b3). Quintilian summarizes this guide to euphemism as follows: “ut pro temerario fortem, prodigo liberalem, avaro parcum vocemus” (*Institutio oratoria* 3.7.25).²¹ This may be precisely what Pliny has in mind at the outset of his *Panegyric* when he disavows such an abuse of language. Then Aristotle reminds the epideictic orator that he must consider the audience before whom he delivers his speech of praise, for different audiences have different value systems, such as the Scythians, the Spartans, and the philosophers (1367b7–11). The Renaissance commentator Johann Sturm immediately recognized the sophistic nature of Aristotle’s argument in *Rhetoric* 1.9, and he has a keen commentary on Aristotle’s examples of different audiences with radically different values: “He posits three types of people, and the first is the worst, namely the Scythians, for whom it was praiseworthy to kill their guests. The Spartans are the second type, because they respected war but allowed theft and didn’t condemn it. And there is

no race of men among whom something cannot be praised.”²² So Sturm derives from the Aristotelian-sophistic principle of the relativity of values the lesson that nothing is *illaudatus*: there is no conduct so deplorable that it cannot be praised somewhere. Conversely, whatever we praise to one audience may prove odious to another. Praise doesn't travel since values change from place to place. On the basis of this fairly conventional insight, we want to examine the tension between competing value systems within Renaissance culture and the role of epideictic in fomenting this tension. To do so, we first need to propose a schematic typology of Renaissance values.

Therefore, as an organizing principle, not a philosophical one, we will attempt briefly to classify those values that constitute the collective identity of Renaissance readers, writers, and critics of epideictic works. The classes within this classificatory scheme can correspond to different corporate identities within Renaissance culture such as humanists and scholastics. The first class in our classification, a classification intended as a gloss on our table of contents rather than as a new explanation of the European Renaissance, encompasses Platonic values. Plato's dialogues stage a confrontation between Socrates and the sophists, as the archetypes of the philosopher and the antiphilosopher. Socrates represents the positive value and the sophists the negative value. These values are so fully assimilated by the Renaissance that to praise the sophists or to blame Socrates can only be odious praise. Yet Socrates was condemned by his own contemporaries, not only in court but also in epideictic prose, and the lost *Accusation of Socrates* by the infamous Polycrates launched an enduring challenge to the politics of Platonic values. In the sixteenth century, Platonic values come under particularly corrosive scrutiny in the vernacular discourses of Sperone Speroni, who by turns attacks and defends both Socrates and his adversaries the sophists and even equates the two at times. We can discern some similar impulse in the Latin declamations of Girolamo Cardano, who claims that Socrates is overrated (and Nero underrated). Finally, Michel de Montaigne revisits the politics of praise in his essays on Socrates and Sparta and in his neo-Socratic challenge to humanism.

The next class of values is Ciceronian values, and these values are challenged and affirmed through the praise of language. Cicero engages in a sort of odious praise when he prefers Latin to Greek, as he does in his dialogue *De finibus* and elsewhere, and Renaissance writers extend the debate from the classical languages to the vernacular, as does Joachim Du Bellay in his *Deffence et Illustration de la Langue Françoise*. In the Renaissance,

linguistic identity is closely entwined with one of the most odious forms of epideixis, the praise and dispraise of Cicero, of which a spectacular but not unique example is Erasmus's *Dialogus Ciceronianus*. A more representative but less-known example is the *Apology of Plautus* by Francesco Florido, who appoints himself the adversary of all the slanderers of the Latin tongue. An analysis of Florido's work will allow us to synthesize many of the implications of odious praise.

A further class of values is defined by the challenge they pose to humanism, and we can call these values, for brevity's sake, church values. Church values feature prominently in Lorenzo Valla's *Praise of Thomas Aquinas*, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's letter to Ermolao Barbaro in praise of the scholastics, and Erasmus's *Praise of Folly*. In the case of the latter, the correspondence between Erasmus and Maarten van Dorp testifies to the resentment aroused by the *Moria* among professional theologians as well as the struggle Erasmus waged to identify his work with encomium rather than satire. These works, ostensibly works of praise, call into question some of the fundamental practices of church and university, and the controversy they generated testifies to the power of odious praise to undermine any stable system of values.

Needless to say, there are some values that transcend these corporate identities, values such as belief in god and adherence to the true religion, and to challenge these values is a very serious proposition. Here again, Isocrates's *Busiris* can come in handy. Rather than fall into the same trap as Polycrates, Isocrates directs his praise not at Busiris but at the venerable institutions of Egypt, and especially its religion, for which Busiris may be thought to deserve some residual credit. The irony of this praise is that the Egyptians represented, in the eyes of Isocrates's audience, the very paragons of superstition. So we can suspect some ulterior motive when Isocrates insists that the Egyptians are most to be praised and admired for their piety and cult of the gods (11.24). Why should gross superstition earn the praise of fourth-century rationalists? Because those who manage religious matters so that punishments and rewards seem more swift and sure than they really are confer a great boon on mortal life.²³ In other words, religion is a hoax and it works. Isocrates's sixteenth-century editor and commentator Hieronymus Wolf was quick to see through this reasoning and to spot the praise of superstition and imposture. He's trying to show the usefulness of religion, Wolf remarks in his commentary on 11.24, but he ought to distinguish between religion and superstition. If you can't tell the difference, you're an atheist.²⁴ Isocrates clearly makes Wolf nervous, because

in the interim between Isocrates's era and his own, this argument had been adapted by Polybius, Cicero, Machiavelli, and a host of others to the praise of Roman religion and to the functional analysis of religion *tout court*. Isocrates's encomium and the reaction it provoked in the Renaissance remind us that no praise is more odious than the praise of religion. We will have ample opportunity to confirm this impression in the prose writings of Niccolò Machiavelli, Jean Bodin, and Michel de Montaigne.

This last and most insidious form of praise is also the most useful. In the hands of creative thinkers, odious praise becomes a tool of social thought and a technique for analyzing social institutions. It helps us to understand social dynamics without being inhibited by traditional value judgments. Ever versatile, odious praise fulfills a range of functions from rhetorical exercise to social science.