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Goethe admitted, “So true it is that whatever inwardly confirms man in his self-conceit, or flatters his secret vanity, is so highly desirable to him, that he does not ask further, whether in other respects it may turn to his honor or disgrace.”¹ That’s where flattery leads: to honor or disgrace.

This book is a shortcut, whatever way you’re headed. If you’re in a hurry, it will reduce bumps and detours. If you have time to kill, these pages will pardon it. For company you’ll have lusty royalty, learned saints, and military geniuses. The argument capers like a hound, runs off, and returns with something for you between its teeth.

Set your pace to a stroll. Stop whenever you want. Interrupt, jump back and forth, I won’t mind. This book should be as easy as laughter. It is stuffed with small things to take away. Please help yourself.

Flattery has warm and fuzzy anecdotes, fashions and traditions, old tricks and new ones. It is sweet, sticky, addictive, and as full of surprises as a new lover. It gets its kicks by flirting with insult and ridicule. You’ll see.

New for the millennium, Richard Stengel’s (*You’re Too Kind*): *A Brief History of Flattery* (2000) gave flattery studies a fresh start and a family tree by beginning with chimpanzees, who flatter each other for sex, status, and survival. “The word that primatologists use over and over to describe chimpanzee behavior is ‘Machiavellian.’”² (Machiavelli and flattery mix like vermicelli and pesto.) I am grateful that Stengel treated higher primates — Capellanus, Castiglione, Lord Chesterfield, Tocqueville, and Dale Carnegie — saving me the trouble. Though the topic requires that I cross his path now and then, I explore different places. We agree that flattery is inevitable, deceptively trivial, and sometimes inspired.

Royal courts are flattery’s most famous laboratories. Its masters include Cleopatra, Shakespeare, and Disraeli, its color is purple, its

domain reaches round the globe. “O power of flattery! How far you extend, and how wide are the frontiers of your pleasant realm!” exclaimed Cervantes.³

Fighting my fondness for poetry and fiction (not always successfully), I thought it preferable to pick examples of real flattery in real situations. Hundreds of such examples follow; there could have been hundreds more, but many are too much alike. One historian to another, David Hume advised Edward Gibbon, “Men run with great avidity to give their evidence in favor of what flatters their passions and their national prejudices.”⁴

I rely heavily on multivolume histories, political tracts, and memoirs of kings, queens, and their circles. I have been partial to authors who held high office, historians like Tacitus, Burke, and Guizot, and statesmen like Franklin and Cicero. Sacred texts and members of the clergy are cited. Shamefully, for thousands of years, flattery by women has been admonished rather than recorded, with scarce exceptions. Athenaeus mentions the *Kolakides*, women who specialized in flattering powerful women, but says little about them.⁵ I give you the rivalries of Versailles.

Flattery flourished in imperial China and classical Greece. Otto Ribbeck’s *Kolax* (1883), the single most important book on flattery, focuses on Greek classics. The basic Greek corpus includes Aesop (sixth century BC), who stereotyped the flattering fox; Plato (circa 427–347 BC), who famously described a flatterer [παράσιτος] as “a fearsome and most pernicious creature”; and Plutarch (circa AD 45–120), whose “How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend” is the core text of flattery studies.⁶ Athenaeus (circa AD 170–circa 230) records the names, gains, and failures of famous flatterers of the ancient world: Tithymallus, Chairephon, Moschion.

Roman historians chronicled the infestation of the empire with flatterers. A fine phrase from Tacitus, “blanditiae sunt pessimum veri adfectus venenum” [flattery is the worst poison of true affection], became a literary commonplace.⁷

Flattery decorated the Italian Renaissance. Raphael flattered the papacy. Michelangelo flattered the Medici. Machiavelli flatters and gives flattery advice in *The Prince* (1513), a guide as useful for managing a prince as for being one.

Flattery abounded in the 1600s and 1700s. Louis XIV, La Fontaine, La Rochefoucauld, Saint-Simon, Gibbon, Burke, and Samuel Johnson returned to it again and again.

Not long ago there was a vogue for “secret memoirs,” high-end scandal mongering, some of it possibly true. One example illustrates them all. In 1815 Charles Doris published his *Secret Memoirs of Napoleon Buonaparte*, claiming to reveal the emperor’s private life in the last fifteen years of his glory. Doris set himself

a plan, the most inconceivable, the most difficult, perhaps the most dangerous that could ever have entered into the ideas of man. This was to pursue a constant and unvaried study of the character of Buonaparte, physically, as well as morally; to observe him alike in public and in private, by day and by night, in a word at every moment when I could approach him, could hear him. I saw him daily, but not constantly; on occasions of very particular interest I quitted him, except when he was in his fits of passion—I was then his master. The sort of carelessness and semi-idiotism which I outwardly assumed when with him, placed me above the reach of suspicion, and delivered him up to me entirely.

And what did this semi-idiotic master of Napoleon see? “A disgusting assemblage of meanness, of imposture, of self-interest, of servile adulation, or corruption, of incapacity! — It seemed a contest who should degrade themselves most before the idol. Every thing in Buonaparte was false, but a part of his court was still more so; — if he ruled France with a rod of iron, it was forged by his flatterers. From the days of Pharamond to his days, never was a monarch flattered so incessantly, so servilely.”⁸ Doris begins with superlative self-flattery (“most inconceivable, most difficult, most dangerous”) and ends

by condemning flatterers. This is typical. The history of flattery is crossed with contradictions, blurred by codes, spread by spies, and double-crossed by hypocrisy, that most tenacious of confusions.

Thinkers who think about flattery, flatterers avid to apply it, and potentates raised or ruined by it repeat a set of standard lessons, here collected. You don't have to wear a powdered wig or risk a duel to learn the lessons they learned. They strained and suffered; you need only read about them. Because flattery is fleeting, you needn't read much.

This book about flattery is short because flattery should be quick and to the point. For easy use, the rules of flattery are numbered and printed conspicuously. I take the format from Balzac's *Physiology of Marriage* (1829). You can learn a lot about flattery from Balzac, but his books are longer, older, fiction, and French.⁹

Now, onward! To honor or disgrace!

1. Welcome

When Fortune flatters,
she comes to ensnare.

PUBLILIUS SYRUS



When is praise praiseworthy and when not?

Tyrants want praise so much they demand it by the stadiumful, but forced praise is near screams and weeping. Voluntary praise is the kind most people value. It comes in three types.¹

1. Spontaneous praise given to someone who has earned it. This type is precious and abundant: it happens on first dates, after home repair and school recitals, and during speeches and sports events.

2. Prepared praise given to someone who has earned it. Praises at graduations, retirements, and religious ceremonies are carefully rehearsed. Such praise can be as sublime as an orchestra and choir.

3. Praise, either spontaneous or prepared, given whether earned or not, in order to get something in return. This is flattery.²

⇒ RULE 1: *When praise seeks a reward, it is flattery.*

“The two main Ends of Flattery are Profit or Safety,” said Sir Roger L’Estrange, but not all flattery is scheming or venal: often flattery seeks nothing more than to be liked and noticed.³ Not all flattery is selfish: parents flatter for their children’s sake, and friends for friends’. Only the witless dismiss flattery as worthless. On the contrary, flattery has a price, and if it’s very good, the price can be very high. William Hazlitt wrote, “Flattery and submission are marketable commodities like any other, have their price, and ought scarcely to be obtained under false pretences.”⁴

The great Greek sage Plutarch goes to the heart of the matter: “The flatterer allures by means of pleasures and concerns himself with pleasures.”⁵

4 *Welcome*☞ RULE 2: *Praise must please.*

If it does not please, it's noise. Excellent flattery can be so pleasing that it can be perceived as flat-out flattery and please even so. Excellent flatterers welcome attentive audiences; mighty potentates enjoy public praise. In the most pleasing situation, a flatterer would genuinely admire the flatteree, please that person, please other present company, be pleased to stagger rivals, and get something out of it: applause, promotion, a favor, reciprocal praise. Flattery is as social as a banquet.

☞ RULE 3: *Flattery civilizes.*

Bernard Mandeville thought flattery took the first step toward civilization. Primitive people

thoroughly examin'd all the Strength and Frailties of our Nature, and observing that none were either so savage as not to be charm'd with Praise, or so despicable as patiently to bear Contempt, justly concluded, that Flattery must be the most powerful Argument that could be used to Human Creatures. Making use of this bewitching Engine, they extoll'd the Excellency of our Nature above other Animals, and setting forth with unbounded Praises the Wonders of our Sagacity and Vastness of Understanding, bestow'd a thousand Encomiums on the Rationality of our Souls, by the Help of which we were capable of performing the most noble Atchievements.⁶

Flattery is an advanced form of animal mimicry. Edmund Burke, counselor of parliaments and kings, observed that “it is by imitation far more than by precept, that we learn everything; and what we learn thus, we acquire not only more effectually, but more pleasantly. This forms our manners, our opinions, our lives. It is one of the strongest links of society; it is a species of mutual compliance, which all men yield to each other, without constraint to themselves, and which is extremely flattering to all.”⁷

⇒ RULE 4: *Anything praise can do, flattery can imitate.*

Imitation creates a community—people dress alike, sound alike, share similar views—and makes sharp distinctions of small differences. Madame de Maintenon, beloved of Louis XIV, advised her circle to imitate “with ingenuity.”⁸ Like everything else in society, imitation has limits, and flattery has boundaries beyond which lie censure and ridicule.

⇒ RULE 5: *To stand out, flattery must fit in.*

When flattery is misplaced it is fatal to a flatterer. A flatterer must be able to work a crowd or flatter a target in the midst of one. The audience needs to be taken into account, not just the person flattered, and not only the present audience but possible future ones. “Holbein, according to legend, so flattered Anne of Cleves that Henry VIII mar-

1. Hans Holbein's portrait of Anne of Cleves (circa 1539) did not show her smallpox scars. On the basis of the portrait, Henry VIII drew up a marriage contract. The king had a different impression upon seeing Anne herself; he divorced her six months later.



ried her on the strength of the likeness, with the result that as soon as the King saw the original the painter had to fly the country.”⁹

The well-known line “Imitation is the sincerest of flattery” comes from the Reverend Charles Caleb Colton’s *Lacon* (1820).¹⁰ His book sold well, thanks in large part to his energy in promoting it. Colton sailed away from money trouble in Britain to publish the work in the United States, where it was quickly taken up and often reprinted.¹¹

On the title page of *Lacon* Colton addresses his book “to *those who think*,” brash immediate flattery. Colton admits it is a marketing tactic: “Although the proportion of those who *do* think be extremely small, yet every individual flatters himself that he is *one* of the number.”¹² How does Rev. Colton think? Shrewdly. One of his publishers described him as a pious fraud, an eloquent beggar, a cheat: “a man of low, groveling, and vicious propensities.” Colton was also author of “Hypocrisy: A Satirical Poem.” His parishioners believed it was a subject he knew well.¹³

Rev. Colton found flattery at church, inn, and polling place. He observed a firm rule:

⇒ RULE 6: *Insults can flatter.*

“Some who affect to dislike flattery, may yet be flattered indirectly, by a well seasoned abuse and ridicule of their rivals. Diogenes professed to be no flatterer; but his cynic raillery was, in other words, flattery; it fed the ruling passion of the Athenian mob, who were more pleased to hear their superiors abused, than themselves commended.”¹⁴ Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote of “the perpetual *flattery of abuse*” suffered by reformers.¹⁵

Abuse is flattery’s heritage. Aristotle thought that “to be a flatterer is a reproach.”¹⁶ Rather, to be known as nothing *but* a flatterer is a reproach. As if vilification were a virtue, they who flatter badly hiss those who flatter well.

⇒ RULE 7: *Flattery is always under attack.*

For centuries an absurdity was proverbial: “plus nocet lingua adulatoris quam manus persecutoris” [the tongue of the flatterer hurts more than the sword of the persecutor], hyperbolic humbug. Wherever flattery thrives it is denounced as “the handmaid of vice,” “that filthy science,” “the worst of vices,” the “prostitution of empty praise,” and the like.¹⁷

Biblical flattery is concentrated in the Old Testament—Jacob flattered Esau, hypocrites flattered God—and further concentrated in Proverbs, which warns, “A man who flatters his neighbor is spreading a net for his feet” (Proverbs 29:5). In his *Imitation of Christ*, Thomas à Kempis advised the Christian to avoid flatterers, strangers, women, the young, and the rich—or, failing that, to become a monk.¹⁸ Despite recurring condemnations of it, Christianity took to flattery as it did to imperial Rome. Inspired Christians have produced much of the world’s most memorable flattery.

⇒ RULE 8: *Flattery thrives in religion.*

Priests, pastors, and pontiffs have railed against flattery and have been railed against for loving it. Nothing human is pure enough, not even religion, to repel pretensions, prevarications, and flattery. In 1771 Samuel Adams asked, “But are we not fallen into an age when *some* even of the Clergy think it no shame to *flatter the Idol*; and thereby to lay the people, as in the days of *Jeroboam, the son of Nebat*, under a temptation to commit great wickedness, and sin against God? Let us beware of the poison of flattery.”¹⁹ By “*Idol*” Adams meant King George; by citing *Jeroboam* he meant any king.

Bad flatterers make bad flattery, giving all flattery a bad name.²⁰ The eighteenth century was especially peeved about it. Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary* (1756) defines “cajole,” “coax,” “cog,” “collogue,” “daub,” “fawn,” “glose,” “paw,” and “smooth” as “flatter”; John Ash’s *Dictionary* (2nd edition, 1795) adds “blandish,” “claw,” “court,”

“curry,” “glaver,” and “wheedle.” Nowadays harsh words like “boot-licker,” “kiss-ass,” and “brownnose” label the worst sorts of flatterer, though, to be fair, to claw and glaver may be all a kiss-ass can do. Because bad flattery stinks and it’s everywhere, little attention will be given to it here. This book will emphasize good flattery—indeed, the best. For the best, one rule reigns supreme:

☞ **RULE 9:** *Flattery works best when it’s true.*

For a flatterer, lying is precarious. A flatterer with a bad reputation will be a bad flatterer. A flattering rival cannot be trusted, no matter what words sweetly spill. Writing of the Russian court of Catherine the Great, Charles Masson described as base and servile those who “know not how to be polite without meanness, or to flatter without falsehood.”²¹ At its best, flattery is truth well dressed, and it is best dressed with fine see-through fabrics. Honest flattery can caress a lover, cover up a gaffe, and muffle aggression.

A first-class flatterer delivers decent, respectable flattery that can be repeated without blushing. First-class flattery ripples awhile. All formal praises—toasts, odes, introductions, elegies, obituaries, letters of recommendation—are made better or worse by the freshness and flavor of their flattery.

☞ **RULE 10:** *The quality of flattery is judged by results.*

Originality is good, but not always necessary. Some flatteries have hardened into etiquette and some improve with repetition. You flatter your conversation partners when you agree with what they say; you delight them if you repeat their words as if they’re matchless. Reliance on the already said is safe practice, but an ambitious flatterer needs to be able to create compliments on the spot. For this, certain habits are useful. Magnification is most obvious.

⇒ RULE 11: *Flattery tends to exaggerate.*

Flattery is the zoom lens of psycho-optics. It hyperbolizes anything, especially when flattering oneself. Memoirs and autobiographies confirm the rule: Paramahansa Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi* stretches incredibly. There have been momentous occasions when flattery claimed that men are gods, a topic so supercharged it serves as the climax to this book.

An artful flatterer instills a desire for more flattery and will not give too much. Amateurs hesitate, or worse, they gush. Napoleon's appetite for flattery pushed to the limit. "All the exaggerations of flattery were exhausted during the Consulate; and in the years which followed, it was necessary for poets often to repeat themselves. Thus, in the couplets of Lyons, the First Consul was the *God of victory, the conqueror of the Nile and of Neptune, the savior of his country, the peacemaker of the world, the arbiter of Europe*. The French soldiers were transformed into *friends and companions of Alcides*, etc., all of which was cutting the ground from under the feet of the singers of the future."²²

⇒ RULE 12: *Flattery is spoiled by excess.*

Much can be too much. Louis XIV told Racine, "I would praise you more if you had praised me less." Lucian of Samosata warned that intelligent potentates despise overdone praise. His example is Aristobulus who, to impress Alexander the Great, "inserted in his history an account of a single combat between Alexander and Porus [a king of India], and selected this passage to read aloud to the former; he reckoned that his best chance of pleasing was to invent heroic deeds for the king, and heighten his achievements." He reckoned wrong. Alexander angrily took the book, tossed it in the river, and threatened to toss Aristobulus after it.²³

☞ RULE 13: *Flattery is a science.*²⁴

Flattery needs to be carefully calibrated. It improves with education, it advances through close observation of cause and effect, and it is based on repeated experience. Among fine-tuned people, flattery requires almost atomic precision.

☞ RULE 14: *Flattery is an art.*

It seeks emotional response, it assumes personality (sometimes more than one), and it has masterpieces and grotesques.²⁵ Gibbon described flattery as “the most useful of all arts,” an opinion he derived from a close study of the history of emperors.²⁶ “’Tis the finest of the Arts,” George Meredith quipped. “We might call it moral sculpture. Adepts in it can cut their friends to any shape they like by practicing it with the requisite skill. I myself, poor hand as I am, have made a man act Solomon by constantly praising his wisdom.”²⁷ Relying on nothing but the momentary pleasure of compliments, flattery works on more powerful emotions, or it doesn’t work.

Machiavelli entitled the twenty-third chapter of *The Prince* “How to Avoid Flatterers” and gives sound, time-tested advice. He proposes this simile: “Just as those who paint landscapes place themselves in a low position on the plain in order to consider the nature of the mountains and the high places and place themselves atop mountains in order to study the plains, in like manner, to know well the nature of a people one must be a prince, and to know well the nature of princes one must be of the people.”²⁸ Machiavelli warns against flatterers—all flatterers do—but first he flatters. How? By comparing the ideal prince to a painter in the hills.

- ⇒ RULE 15: *Potentates like to be praised for their artistic sensitivity.*

Without them we would have poor architecture, less opera, no ballet, desolate galleries, and unperformed symphonies. The art of flattery enriches every other art.

A person who has every advantage to get ahead, except flattery, will sooner or later compete with someone else who has flattery, too. Intelligence, good looks, natural charm, and loyalty can be outmaneuvered by a charming intelligent flatterer.

- ⇒ RULE 16: *In a man's world the best flatterers are women.*

Saint-Simon described the Princesse des Ursins, the perfect flatterer for the court of Louis XIV.

She was rather tall than otherwise, a brunette, with blue eyes of the most varied expression, in figure perfect, with a most exquisite bosom; her face, without being beautiful, was charming; she was extremely noble in air, very majestic in demeanour, full of graces so natural and so continual in everything, that I have never seen any one approach her, either in form or mind. Her wit was copious and of all kinds: she was flattering, caressing, insinuating, moderate, wishing to please for pleasing's sake, with charms irresistible when she strove to persuade and win over; accompanying all this, she had a grandeur that encouraged instead of frightening; a delicious conversation, inexhaustible and very amusing, for she had seen many countries and persons; a voice and way of speaking extremely agreeable, and full of sweetness. She had read much, and reflected much. She knew how to choose the best society, how to receive them, and could even have held a court; was polite, distinguished; and above all was careful never to take a step in advance without dignity and discretion. She was eminently fitted for intrigue.²⁹