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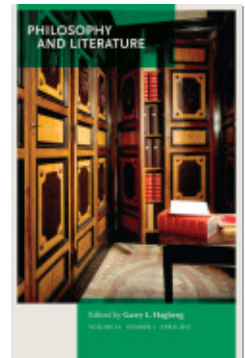
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in Works of Fiction

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Philosophy and Literature, Volume 41, Number 1, April 2017, pp. 91-102
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/phl.2017.0006>



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Symposium: Literature and Moral Vision

E. M. DADLEZ

HUME, HALOS, AND ROUGH HEROES: MORAL AND AESTHETIC DEFECTS IN WORKS OF FICTION

Abstract. Under review are Anne Eaton's robust immoralism and Noël Carroll's moderate moralism. Their differences of opinion have historical antecedents dating back to the work of David Hume. With the supporters of robust immoralism, I maintain here that that fictions valorizing so-called rough heroes, to whom both positive and negative moral attributes are ascribed, can arouse reactions as aesthetically compelling as they are morally troubling. However, I will concur with the moderate moralists in claiming that the troubling moral reaction targeted need not be a sufficient ground for attributing a moral flaw to the work itself.

THE STARTING POINT OF this paper is a recent exchange in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*¹ that pits moderate moralism against robust immoralism and has Humean antecedents. I will proceed by agreeing in part with both, but fully with neither, thereby annoying as many people as possible in one go. I believe, with Anne Eaton, the proponent of robust immoralism, that fictions which valorize what she calls "rough heroes" can arouse both aesthetically compelling and morally troubling reactions. On the other hand, I argue (and this puts me at least partly in Noël Carroll's moderate moralist camp) that the troubling moral reaction targeted need not be a sufficient ground for

attributing a moral flaw to the work itself. The works of Eaton's robust immoralism do not prescribe unethical attitudes. Rather, they confront us with heroes who combine positive traits with negative moral ones. The crucial question is whether a work can be considered immoral *not* for prescribing an immoral response but for compromising the work's prescriptions with conflicting endorsements, exerting a halo effect on traits that should be condemned.

I agree with Eaton that this kind of complication can result in provocative and compelling works. I am not equally convinced, however, that the works are thereby ethically flawed. As Eaton acknowledges, they can't be held to exhibit ethical flaws on account of their endorsements or prescriptions. Arguably, they resemble more accurately the kinds of responses we have to real people and events, by showing us what concatenations of traits are possible instead of reinforcing ethical prescriptions by endowing attractive characters exclusively with other traits toward which we have positive attitudes. I diverge from Eaton in my unwillingness to consider works morally defective on account only of *potentially* detrimental effects, especially given the possibility of a reverse halo effect that might lead us to lower our estimates of positive nonmoral traits because of their association with negative moral ones.

First, some background. Both positions involve assumptions frequently associated with a passage in David Hume's "Of the Standard of Taste"² that is by now familiar to all who write on the issue of how aesthetic defects may stem from moral ones:

where the ideas of morality and decency alter from one age to another, and where vicious manners are described, without being marked with the proper characters of blame and disapprobation; this must be allowed to . . . be a real deformity. I cannot, nor is it proper I should, enter into such sentiments; and however I may excuse the poet, on account of the manners of his age, I never can relish the composition. The want of humanity and of decency, so conspicuous in the characters drawn by several of the ancient poets . . . , diminishes considerably the merit of their noble performances. . . . We are not interested in the fortunes and sentiments of such rough heroes: We are displeas'd to find the limits of vice and virtue so much confounded: And whatever indulgence we may give to the writer on account of his prejudices, we cannot prevail on ourselves to enter into his sentiments, or bear an affection to characters, which we plainly discover to be blameable. ("ST," pp. 246–47)

While I do not believe that Hume's account is in all respects comparable to accounts of moderate moralism that have recently been put forward (although I think it has more in common with Carroll's account than others), there is a clear historical connection between Hume's insight and many of the claims that moderate moralists make, and a considerable, though less direct, connection to immoralist claims as well. I maintain that until we can come to some agreement on what moral and aesthetic flaws and merits *are*—on whether they constitute some characteristic of the narrative itself or some effect that the narrative has on readers or appreciators—there is too much opportunity for arguing past one another in any attempt to come to a consensus on moral and aesthetic assessments.

There is a certain amount of agreement, at least among many philosophers, that works that endorse or recommend immoral perspectives are morally flawed. There is still some (though rather less) agreement that such works are on this account aesthetically flawed, since the responses dictated by the work cannot achieve uptake by virtuous audiences. The debate about our imaginative capacities—about whether a failure of uptake among the virtuous is the invariable consequence of the endorsement of immoral perspectives—will be set aside for the moment. Some will be inclined to argue that what we imagine needn't involve us in the outright conscription of moral perspectives. Others will contend that we cannot imagine what we cannot conceive. If we can imagine some action's being right, our conception of rightness must encompass the possibility of an act of that kind being permissible (though perhaps only in circumstances like those depicted in the fiction). Thus, imagining in the way prescribed by the work makes us complicit in an immoral perspective.

Let us for the moment, and for purposes of argument, take this view as uncontroversial. While there are very complicated ways of accounting for how we are to determine what a work's ethical perspective is—what we can take that work to endorse or recommend, morally speaking—many uncomplicated and clear cases are to hand. Other philosophers have already taken up the daunting task of determination, so we need only focus here on uncontroversial examples. *The Turner Diaries* endorses genocide as a morally proper course of action, for instance, just as many of Dickens's works condemn social and political arrangements that disenfranchise the economically disadvantaged, and do so on moral grounds.

An ethical perspective is put forward for imaginative adoption in each case. In the world of *Oliver Twist*, certain social arrangements affecting

the disadvantaged are morally despicable. In *The Turner Diaries*, races other than the Aryan must be disposed of in order to save humanity from degeneration, and this truth in the fiction is presented as a moral imperative. Carroll and Eaton would agree that the *Turner Diaries*-kind of case presents us with a moral defect that conduces to an aesthetic one. Recommending a perspective that cannot be adopted, at least by the virtuous reader, inhibits uptake and imaginative engagement and thereby produces aesthetic failure.

Note that this kind of moral defect is just a kind of authorial (or possibly directorial or thespian or cinematographic) mistake. If a work were to prescribe or recommend fear, the delineated circumstances would at the very least have to be consistent with audience conceptions of danger in order to elicit fear. Were the work to recommend or endorse fearful attitudes while depicting a scenario replete with kittens and rainbows, it would fail to elicit fright from those who regard kittens and rainbows as benign. It is possible to imagine such an endorsement, even if it seems ridiculous. Suspenseful music could play as a kitten awakened and stretched. Characters could be shown to quail in terror as it pounced on a catnip mouse. But it seems ludicrous for a reason, and that reason is the mismatch between the attitude recommended and the circumstances that ought to warrant it.

The same difficulty afflicts a work that recommends or endorses approving attitudes without producing circumstances that would warrant them. Just as we cannot entertain fearfully the kinds of circumstances we believe sufficient for perfect safety, an appropriately morally sensitive audience (perhaps an audience of more or less ideal Humean critics) cannot entertain approvingly the kinds of circumstances we believe sufficient for wholesale depravity. In other words, the work fails to provide grounds sufficient for the attitude it endorses or recommends or prescribes. And this is the kind of mistake that will inhibit uptake in all but those who have fallen prey to exactly the same error: those who have false beliefs about danger, say, or those who have false beliefs about white supremacy.

This is not the dispute under consideration, but it provides a necessary background. The bone of contention in the case of Eaton's rough heroes involves a different kind of work. Such cases do not involve an error of the kind described in the preceding paragraphs. It is not true in the worlds of such works that immoral actions are good or that despicable policies are admirable. No overarching moral recommendation delivered by the work labels circumstances as morally different from

what a virtuous audience would believe them to be, though sometimes I think the works in question deliberately eschew overarching moral recommendations.

The kind of work that Eaton presents for our consideration contains no conceptual mislabelings but confronts us with heroes who combine positive traits (usually nonmoral, but occasionally moral) with negative moral ones. The example referred to repeatedly is that of Tony Soprano, but I will indulge myself by dwelling on two characters by whom I have been more or less seduced. The character in my more respectable literary example, even though the work in which she appears portrays her as a wicked adventuress, is Becky Sharp of Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*. Becky is the villain of the book, as is made clear repeatedly by the intrusive, sarcastic, moralizing omniscient narration. She lies, she cheats, she steals. In as choice an example of black humor as it is possible to find, a chapter entitled "How to Live Well on Nothing a Year" and the succeeding chapter outline the nefarious exploitation of an innocent and affectionate former servant by Becky and her husband, Rawdon Crawley:

This was the way, then, Crawley got his house for nothing; for though Raggles had to pay taxes and rates, and the interest of the mortgage to the brother butler; and the insurance of his life; and the charges for his children at school; and the value of the meat and drink which his own family—and for a time that of Colonel Crawley too—consumed; and though the poor wretch was utterly ruined by the transaction, his children being flung on the streets, and himself driven into the Fleet Prison: yet somebody must pay even for gentlemen who live for nothing a year—and so it was this unlucky Raggles was made the representative of Colonel Crawley's defective capital.³

Poor Raggles indeed! And yet the reader laughs. And the reader, if she is like me, likes Becky Sharp. Becky Sharp is a survivor. She is talented musically and theatrically. She is far more intelligent than most of the deserving characters, and a good deal less boring as well. She has a sense of humor. She has courage. But she does perfectly awful things. The book delivers a clear and heavy-handed condemnation of those awful things. And while we might not regard some of them as so bad in the present day, especially Becky's sexual escapades, I have pulled out the Raggles incident—the exploitation of someone who loves you and the ruin of that person and his family—as an example of an immoral action about which there would be little dispute. That action is condemned and yet the passage, indeed, the entire chapter,

is funny. Becky harms others, but her good points—her courage and intelligence and determination and talent—are admirable. In line with Eaton's points, reactions to Becky's wrongdoing and to her positive traits cannot really be isolated from each other. One admires her deviousness, for instance, just because it is so clever, even if it results in harm. The "halo bias" Eaton describes is said to result in a contamination of our disapproving moral attitudes (poor Raggles!) by positive attitudes that have nothing to do with morality (God, she's ingenious!).

Even more entertaining, though far less respectable, examples can be found in Thackeray. The activities of most of the denizens of George R. R. Martin's *A Game of Thrones* give rise to exactly the kinds of questions Eaton raises. My remarks will apply to the books and the television program equally, though this *Slate* review is written about the television series, which has achieved truly spectacular popularity:

Much like *Star Wars* and Hogwarts and other great Neverlands, *Game of Thrones* doesn't hold a mirror to anything. It is aggressively false, a work of far-fetched imagination so intricate and finely realized it becomes compelling on its own terms, disorienting and dazzling us in the ways that only the best storytelling can. This is a show where we cheer on an adolescent girl's precocious transformation into a serial murderer; this is a show in which a character's desire to *release people from slavery* is convincingly rendered as a conundrum.⁴

I agree with the writer's contention that morally disorienting issues are frequently foregrounded in the series of books and programs, though I am inclined to dispute the contention about a dearth of mirror holding. *Game of Thrones* doesn't hold up a mirror to the laws of physics or the history of the world but, like most works of fiction, it does hold up a mirror to loneliness and ambition and greed and sundry conflicts of interest. These are usually dressed up in medieval regalia or accompanied by dragons, but are still quite recognizable. And therein lies the problem. Because the characters of *Game of Thrones* are very rough heroes indeed.

Take Cersei Lannister, the outright villainess of the series. Initially, at least, she is presented as intelligent and politically astute, daughter of a powerful family, queen of the seven kingdoms as wife of Robert Baratheon. We meet her only to discover her clandestine affair with her twin brother, who has fathered all three of her children. The eldest, a close counterpart of Caligula, is mercifully poisoned in the third season. Just as the audience learns of Cersei's incest and adultery, further evidence of her infamy is offered when she and her brother try to murder

a child who has spied out their secret. Any survey of Cersei's activities quickly becomes a catalogue of transgressions. And yet her character is made attractive, at least initially, quite apart from her beauty. Cersei Lannister's reponse to Ned Stark's disgusted accusation of incest is bold and courageous, whatever one may think of incest or adultery or, more seriously, the attempted murder of a child in order to conceal it:

Cersei looked at him defiantly. "My brother is worth a thousand of your friend." [She refers to her husband.]

"Your brother?" Ned said. "Or your lover?"

"Both." She did not flinch from the truth. "Since we were children together. And why not? The Targaryens wed brother to sister for three hundred years to keep the bloodlines pure. And Jamie and I are more than brother and sister. We are one person in two bodies. We shared a womb together. He came into this world holding my foot, our old master said."⁵

One doesn't forgive her the attempted murder, but one may well forgive her the incest. One certainly admires the defiance, the willingness to admit to being who she is, the loyalty to her twin. Cersei's character eventually deteriorates (unfortunately along with her intelligence) to a position of stock villainy from which it has failed to emerge in the course of four books. In the beginning, however, we see a very clear clash between the admirable and despicable qualities characteristic of rough heroes.

Arya Stark is another such problematic character, and here the omniscient narration is far less inclined to condemn her outright, though her morally challenging actions are never fully endorsed. The review cited above exaggerates in claiming that fourteen-year-old Arya is transformed into a serial murderer, though it doesn't exaggerate all that much. The victim of political upheavals including her father's execution, her brother's assassination, and her mother's murder, she is forced inward to find the resources to survive. Unlike her older sister, Sansa, who relies on others to protect her (sometimes with indifferent success), Arya is thrown repeatedly on her own resources, on her wits and internal fortitude and ability to fight. She kills, but she either kills in self-defense or kills evil men—rapists and murderers. Eventually, she cannot sleep until she recites the names of those for whose death she longs—the killers of her family, the torturers of innocents, her father's executioner.

The litany of names becomes a constant in her life, a refrain that follows her into dreams in which she hunts as a wolf:

Arya did not know any Many-Faced God, but if he answered prayers, he might be the God she sought. *Ser Gregor*, she thought, *Dunsen*, *Raff the Sweetling*, *Ser Ilyn*, *Ser Meryn*, *Queen Cersei*. *Only six now*. Joffrey was dead, the Hound had slain Polliver, and she'd stabbed the Tickler herself, and that stupid squire with the pimple. *I wouldn't have killed him if he hadn't grabbed me*. The hound had been dying when she'd left him on the banks of the Trident, burning up with fever from his wound. *I should have given him the gift of mercy and put a knife into his heart*.⁶

She becomes progressively more deadly with the sword that she has named Needle. Arya too is admirable, far more consistently so than Cersei Lannister, in having faced adversity of which the wealthy and privileged Cersei could never dream. This is a character with whom one is intended to empathize, whose grudges and hatreds one is expected imaginatively to adopt. The crucible of war in the seven kingdoms has turned Arya into a formidable instrument of vengeance. And this, again, is in some respects admirable and exciting. Arya is redoubtable and brave, competent and clever, tragic and all too human. It is impossible not to want her to triumph. And there again is the problem, because triumph appears to entail a trail of bodies.

In sum, the existence of rough-hero characters and works that showcase them should be evident, although there might be some disagreement about which works fall into the rough-hero category. I think that almost any film by Quentin Tarantino could be so described. Tarantino has a gift for making us sympathize with killers. There are, of course, arguments about whether some given work *really* prescribes disapproval of an apparently immoral action (some Tarantino revenge porn does not). Apart from this, however, there is the crucial question of whether a work can be considered immoral not because it gets the moral prescription wrong but because it has compromised the uptake of a prescription with conflicting endorsements. This might play out in our excusing the character. Becky Sharp is poor and a woman, in a time and place not particularly receptive to either. She does what she has to do in order to survive. Arya cannot be blamed for acting in self-defense. Such considerations could lead to our taking the character's transgressions less seriously, or having a character's blameworthiness seem, overall, less blameable in light of her courage and resourcefulness.

I agree with Eaton that this kind of complication and entangling of character traits may often result in provocative, compelling, and fascinating works. Clearly, better and worse ways exist to harness such complications to artistic ends, but *Macbeth* and *Lolita* and, I'd argue, *Vanity Fair* all attest to the aesthetic contribution that complexities of this sort engender, and the intense and fascinating aesthetic experiences they can produce.⁷ And the sheer popularity of *Game of Thrones* attests to the extent to which such works can bewitch and transport. The very conflict one experiences in considering such characters can prove profoundly engrossing.

But (sorry, Anne) I am not equally convinced that the *works* in question are ethically flawed. Certainly, as Eaton acknowledges, they can't be held to exhibit ethical flaws on account of their endorsements or prescriptions. Those are, at least in a lot of cases, all aboveboard. No errors exist. Most individuals in the real world possess a combination of positive and negative characteristics, the depiction of which in a fiction should surprise no one. If the authors of fictional works explore what is possible for the human character, they are likely to take such facts into consideration. Selfish people can be brave. Intelligent people can injure others through a total failure of empathy. Charming, witty people can be complete shits.

In particular, people with whom we've grown familiar and of whom we've grown fond often get a pass from us on moral matters, just because we'll love them despite the bad thing that they did. I once attended an ethics conference at which a paper was presented asking whether love required respect as a necessary condition. I'm not sure about love, but extreme affection doesn't. I love my dogs. If my dogs were to lose control and attack the UPS man one ill-omened morning (one dog is already a serial killer of chickens), I would immediately assume that this person had done something annoying. I wouldn't believe that what the dogs did was warranted, but I would seek explanations with an eye to mitigation. My affection for my dogs certainly wouldn't stop because they behaved badly. Eaton's concern is, I think, that fictions featuring rough heroes reinforce such tendencies in us—to our moral detriment.

Here is where I diverge a little. I entirely agree with the first account of a moral flaw. There, we simply had what amounted to an error, a kind of conceptual mistake, that produced a failure of uptake in an appropriately sensitive audience. In the case of a work that valorizes a rough hero, there is no similar error and there is successful uptake, but the uptake itself is seen as potentially detrimental morally. I have two

questions here: why should a moral quandary or confusion caused by contemplating a work convict that work of immorality, and why (and in what way) should the moral confusion in question prove detrimental?

A work that endorses an immoral perspective makes those who imaginatively engage with it complicit in that perspective, according to some lights. The idea is that the conception of right action possessed by those for whom uptake presents no difficulty in this context encompasses the very action promoted or recommended by the work. And so the ascription of immorality has a clear rationale. But those who imaginatively engage with the works featuring rough heroes that Eaton has in mind are not made complicit in an immoral perspective, since an immoral perspective is never endorsed. They are, in other words, subjected to *no* variety of moral confusion and complication that their own lives might not subject them to in the fullness of time.

Neither is it clear that they will change their beliefs about the wrongness of particular actions or the permissibility of particular behaviors just on account of being asked to imagine attractive, compelling people doing them. I agree that such works produce moral confusion, but I don't understand why that confusion should always be to our detriment. Certainly the halo effect has been observed. But it seems possible that negative associations could also attach to positive traits in certain instances in a kind of reverse effect—call it the pitchfork effect. An initial distrust of people who are too plausible and charming could, for instance, follow on the depiction of a plausible villain, or indeed, on meeting up with one in real life. I was put off a particular actor for life, for instance, because of a despicable rapist he played in one film. My association of the actor with the negative traits of that particular portrayal make me incapable of appreciating anything he has done since, unfair though that is. So we can point to real cases in which our estimation of positive traits suffers by association with negative ones. I don't think these are particularly rational reactions, but this sort of association is fundamentally unreflective. It will usually not trump our evaluation of evidence. Psychological studies that show our bias in favor of attractive people and our bias against unattractive ones very often ask us to *guess* the traits of the individual when no information, save that gleaned from their appearance, is on offer. Bias has to diminish at least a little when we're not simply guessing, when we have more to go on than a positive attitude or two. I agree with Eaton that our moral attitudes are challenged and complicated by the kinds of fictions she cites, but I don't think it follows immediately from this that we will change our

established moral judgments. I don't see how the vivid entertainment of a disturbing juxtaposition of traits inevitably, or even usually, would lead to this change.

We are asked to imagine, in the case of Arya Stark, that a sympathetic and admirable human being can long for the death of others. Imagining this commits us to the belief, I think, that it is *possible* for these to be traits of a single person. Such a possibility is something that most of us believe to begin with, and while engaging with the fiction is likely to bring the attractiveness of the person into sharp contrast with her moral deficits, I don't think it will invariably lead us to be more likely to take Arya's bloodthirstiness lightly. We may not always draw cautionary conclusions of the type that Carroll suggests, though I think the association between positive and negative traits may work both ways and undermine the positive in our eyes to some degree. Surely everything would depend on the extent of the reader's aversion to the negative trait, as opposed to the extent of her attraction to the traits positively depicted.

Why assume that the aversion to the negative moral trait is more easily diminished? Desensitization to certain forms of transgression does not seem inevitable. And here is the crux of the matter for me. If desensitization to transgression is only occasional, I am not willing to call the work itself immoral on account of the occasional effect. Partly, my unwillingness to do so represents a broader concern about works being condemned on account of audience reactions, irrespective of possible irrationality and misinterpretation. If the negative moral effect is a consequence of misreading or misunderstanding or sheer simplemindedness on the interpretation front, it seems unfair to hold the work entirely to blame. If the work invites the problematic interpretation, then I am inclined to claim that in some sense, the problematic stance is being endorsed outright. However, I am not comfortable with a work's being condemned *solely* on account of portraying concatenations of traits that can be, and sometimes are, instantiated just as the work depicts them being instantiated, without thereby endorsing them.

I am more inclined to be morally concerned about industry-wide depictions of excessively violent rough heroes. Such depictions often link valor and competence and attractive bodies with the enthusiastic willingness to torture people at the drop of a hat. When such associations are pervasive, something else happens. A case can be made, I think, for desensitization to transgression consequent on constant and repeated exposure to the same associations with no alternative concatenation of associations to be had. But such claims of desensitization are an

indictment of the industry and not of individual works, no single one of which is likely to accomplish on its own the alienation of an individual from her values. Or so I hope.

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1. Noël Carroll, "Rough Heroes: A Response to A. W. Eaton," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 71 (Fall 2013): 371–76; A. W. Eaton, "Reply to Carroll: The Artistic Value of a Particular Kind of Moral Flaw," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 71 (Fall 2013): 376–80.
2. David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," in *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1987), pp. 226–49; hereafter abbreviated "ST."
3. William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, chaps. 36–37, gutenberg.org/files/599/599-h/599-h.htm.
4. Jack Hamilton, "Game of Thrones Isn't Just Great Fun," *Slate*, May 29, 2014, slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2014/05/game_of_thrones_season_4_a_great_show_gets_greater.html.
5. George R. R. Martin, *A Game of Thrones* (New York: Bantam, 1996), p. 485.
6. George R. R. Martin, *A Feast for Crows* (New York: Bantam, 2005), p. 127.
7. Indeed, *Vanity Fair* is rather more subversive and exciting in what amounts to an outright indictment of the apparent virtues of the passive, weak, and parasitic Amelia, but this is a more or less direct claim about how passivity and ineptitude can masquerade as gentleness and delicacy.