2

Denying Caricature

The Romantic period's caricature talk about novels is dominated by anti-caricature rhetoric that seeks to establish the literary quality and verisimilitude of 'strong' characterisations that might otherwise be accused of being 'caricatured' or 'overcharged'. To describe and judge the quality of artistic and literary works' 'likeness' to reality, anti-caricature rhetoric uses a variety of elements from the Romantic period's capacious concept of caricature, including social critique's literalisation of the *troppo caricato* as flesh-caricature. In Romantic caricature talk, 'caricature' associates with the terms found in its contemporary dictionary definitions, such as 'exaggerated', 'overcharged' and 'overdone'; as well as *troppo caricato* terms denoting grotesque delineation ('disproportioned', 'distorted', 'misshapen', 'monstrous', 'gigantic' etc.), phrases relating to the *caricare un ritratto* meaning of caricature (excessive 'contrast', 'overcoloured') and vocabulary evoking caricature's etymological associations with weight, effort and impact ('forced', 'striking', 'violent', etc.). To convey their perceptions of caricature in the work, critics use spatial metaphors (the work's distance from, or proximity to, caricature), painterly metaphors ('strokes' and 'touches' versus 'daubs' and 'glare') and imagery of gigantic and disproportioned bodies. In anti-caricature rhetoric, high value is placed on the 'delicate', 'modest' and 'natural', whereas 'caricature' and its associated terms are frequently modified by pejorative adjectives such as 'coarse', 'gross', 'unnatural', 'ghastly' and so on. James Beattie, for example, draws on anti-caricature vocabulary to illuminate the novel's transition from romance to realism, a contrast dramatised by Cervantes in *Don Quixote*:

> The extravagance of [the books of chivalry that influence Don Quixote] being placed, as it were, in the same groupe with the appearances of nature and the real business of life, the hideous disproportion of the former becomes so glaring by contrast. [. . .] *Don Quixote* occasioned the death of the Old Romance, and gave birth to the New. Fiction henceforth divested herself of her gigantick size, tremendous aspect, and frantick demeanour.[1]

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 22:37:51, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.004

While anti-caricature rhetoric sometimes insists on caricature's total absence from a work, generally 'anti-caricature' rhetoric is not absolutely against caricature: as I remark in Chapter 4, critics frequently propose that novelists should offer a 'heightened' and 'striking' reality that approaches caricature without crossing over into it, or which judiciously incorporates caricature while keeping it subordinate to other elements in the narrative. Often the vocabulary of caricature talk is used to critique a work's overall style or structure for lacking restraint, discipline or self-consciousness in its representation of a reality.

As George Levine has argued, nineteenth-century realism 'was not a solidly self-satisfied vision based in a misguided objectivity and faith in representation, but a highly self-conscious attempt to explore or create a new reality. Its massive self-confidence implied a radical doubt, its strategies of truth telling, a profound self-consciousness'.[2] Part I of this book describes how a 'caricature talk' dominated by anti-caricature rhetoric functions in literary realism's self-consciousness during the Romantic period. Anti-caricature rhetoric, I argue, does not just 'prop up' novelistic realism but actually helps constitute it in the Romantic period – by habilitating for realism the elements of fiction that might seem exaggeratedly humorous, grotesque or 'romantic'; by foregrounding and testing the theoretical distinction between resemblance and equivalence; and by turning novels' fictitious 'reality' into a competition where characters are rated, and novelists ranked against each other. Later, I explore anti-caricature rhetoric in Romantic-period retrospectives on the *Spectator* (Chapter 3), in the long critical tradition on characters in Jane Austen's published and unpublished fiction (Chapter 4), and in the contemporary critical reception of Scott's characters (Chapter 5), as well as analysing how Austen and Scott incorporate anti-caricature rhetoric in the self-conscious realisms of their novels.

Literary criticism of the Romantic period speaks caricature talk most frequently when discussing fictive characters in novels; and non-protagonist characters framed as humorous or satirical are those most likely to attract caricature talk, with anti-caricature rhetoric used to distinguish outright 'caricatures' from the realist solidity of strong characters. In the first part of this chapter, I highlight caricature talk's relationship with literary form in the literary criticism of the Romantic period and put my research in conversation with scholarship on the history of literary character criticism – writing and talking about fictive characters – in order to explain where caricature talk's rhetorical denial of caricature fits in a literary history of the concept of literary character. The second part of this

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 22:37:51, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.004

chapter provides an essential context for Chapter 3's discussion of character 'originality' by giving an account of how prosopographic caricature was conceived of as distinct from imaginative literary characterisation in the Romantic period.

Anti-caricature and Literary Form in the Novel

Anti-caricature rhetoric, alert to the potential 'deformity' of lengthy prose fiction, lends itself in the Romantic period to the formalist imagining of literary works as textual assemblages of parts. In caricature talk about novels, for example, individual characters are parsed into qualities and characteristics, and placed into moral categories; casts of characters are subdivided into principal and subordinate characters; descriptions and characters are separated out from story; and story is conceived as a succession of incidents of different sizes, shapes and shades.

In the worst cases, the literary work might strike the reader as an under-structured 'pile' or 'mass' of content, accumulated through an additive process and striving for novelty and impact by making each example more extreme than the last. Josiah Conder writes that Byron's poem 'Darkness' is 'Fuseli *out-Fuselied*; horror accumulated upon horror in naked hideousness, up to the highest point of exaggeration'; and, in a backhanded compliment, concedes that 'it required indeed a very extraordinary power of conception to make such a rabble of misshapen and ghastly ideas pass before the mind'.[3] Often in such critiques, there is a latent distinction between form and content. Recycling the episode in *Frankenstein* where Victor's opium dream shifts into a series of nightmarish images, the *British Critic* argues that while Shelley's novel has no organisation in its ideas – 'these volumes have neither principle, object, nor moral' – though the horrific content might have been formed into some recognisable didactic or scientific purpose: 'the horror which abounds in [*Frankenstein*] is too grotesque and *bizarre* ever to approach neither the sublime [. . .] and yet we suspect, that the diseased and wandering imagination, which has stepped out of all legitimate bounds, to frame these disjointed combinations and unnatural adventures, might be disciplined into something better'.[4]

Anti-caricature rhetoric could also serve critiques of narrative structure and length, as in Scott's apology for a single-volume *Black Dwarf* in the introduction to the Magnum Opus edition. 'The story was intended to be longer, and the catastrophe more artificially brought out' – but after receiving advice that the character of the Black Dwarf 'was of a kind too

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 22:37:51, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.004

revolting, and more likely to disgust than interest the reader', Scott chose to cut the story short: 'I got off my subject by hastening the story to an end, as fast as it was possible; and by huddling into one volume, a tale which was designed to occupy two, have perhaps produced a narrative as much disproportioned and distorted, as the Black Dwarf who is its subject.'[5]

The targets of anti-caricature rhetoric – disproportion, disjointedness, discordance perceived to result from the mishandling of subject matter and content – might be endemic to the novel as a literary form so reliant on the concatenation of parts. Since novelistic narratives were relatively prolonged and tended to contain more numerous and various settings, incidents and characters than other literary works, critics felt responsible for pointing out the good and bad points that readers might miss, as a writer for the *Scots Magazine* suggests in a review of *Rob Roy*:

> A story is not like a picture or a statue, the whole of which we can take in at one glance, and of course immediately perceive whether there is any absurdity or incongruity in the composition. Our attention is rather successively occupied with different parts than with the whole, and if we are much interested, we shall be very ready either not to perceive or to forget the perplexities in which the narrator has involved himself.

Carving Scott's novel into parts, the reviewer identifies strengths and weaknesses. Descriptions of places are excellent, and characterisations are impressive – but the plot is less interesting: '[I]t is to the character and the descriptions, much more than to the story, that our attention is rivetted in this [novel . . .] and we think the peculiar merit of the piece before us consists in the truth, and the little exaggeration of its leading features'. For this reviewer, *Rob Roy*'s leading features are its characters. With each character delineated in a 'style of accurate drawing, without the slightest distortion or exaggeration', it matters less if the novel as a whole is not well formed. Quoting Hamlet's advice to the players at Elsinore, the *Scots Magazine* reviewer criticises Scott's characterisation of Helen Campbell – who 'out-herods Herod' (*Hamlet* 3.2.14) – and commends other characterisations that 'o'erstep not the modesty of nature' (3.2.19):

> They are the characters of unexaggerated nature [. . .] that we prize by far the most highly in this work, and in some of them the author has shown infinite skill, the weaving together of discordant qualities, with so happy a regard to the due limits and proportions of each, that the result of the whole is the production of a perfectly natural character, even in cases where, 'to overstep the modesty of nature,' was almost unavoidable.[6]

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 22:37:51, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.004

Anti-caricature rhetoric brings fictive characters to the fore in its view of the novelist's ability to construct a strong realism made convincing by 'limits' and 'proportions' as well as 'particulars'. While I have quoted some less typical examples here, most of the Romantic-period caricature talk about novels focuses on characters, and on non-protagonists in particular – using the vocabulary of caricature talk to evaluate how entertaining, how interesting and how strongly related to reality fictive characters are.

John Frow proposes that while the concept of character is 'perhaps the most widely-used of all critical tools, at all levels of analysis', it is 'perhaps the most problematic and the most undertheorized of the basic categories of narrative theory', with 'its sheer obviousness disguis[ing] the conceptual difficulties it presents'.[7] Caricature too has seemed obvious, and like character its use as a critical tool has a history worth investigating. I agree with the argument in Lynch's work on 'character's changing conditions of legibility': that character has no 'true identity' to unmask, but rather consists in historically and materially contingent ways of explaining the human world and making it meaningful.[8] In other words, literary characters are used, often very persuasively, to think, say and effect ideas about ourselves and – perhaps more frequently and more confidently – about others. As Lynch puts it, the history of character can be illuminated by '[t]he cultural historian's task [. . .] of investigating reading and writing practices as local accomplishments – as social technologies that depend on certain verbal forms, practical exercises, codes of deportment, and capacities for pleasure and that permit their users to engage in particular sets of activities'.[9] One of these activities might be the cultural phenomenon that Toril Moi calls 'character talk', a language-game where we 'talk [and write] about fictive characters in much the same way we talk about real people, and yet we don't get confused, we don't begin to mistake fiction for reality'.[10]

In the Romantic period's iteration of the language-game of literary characters, caricature talk explicitly plays with this idea of fictive characters being mistaken for real ones. Here I return to my idea that literature's caricature – the doppelgänger of 'character' as a critical tool – has historically brought consciousness of form and formal 'realism' into the discussion of literary characters, through caricature talk and anti-caricature rhetoric. The Victorian critic Anna Murphy Jameson, one of many character critics who might be accused of 'naïvely realist' psychological analysis, conveys the premise that characters can seem more real *because* they are fictive, not in the sense of being false or of belonging only to fiction, but in the sense of being intensively formed: ideas and facts densely

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 22:37:51, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.004

interconnected through language and narrative. She contrasts Shakespeare's 'wicked women' characters – 'more terrible, because more credible and intelligible' – with 'those monstrous caricatures we meet with in history [. . .] where isolated facts and actions are recorded, without any relation to causes or motives, or connecting feelings; and pictures exhibited, from which the considerate mind turns in disgust, and the feeling heart has no relief but in positive and, I may add, reasonable incredulity'.[11] Caricature talk – often rhetorically pretending that the character's existence pre-exists or exceeds the text – periodically orients character criticism to the text, the author, to characterisation, putting the '-ism' in realism.

Lynch identifies 'character appreciations' like Jameson's with 'romantic faith in unsoundable depths' of mind and feeling, and 'pretext for endless moral invigilation and self-revision'.[12] Early examples of this critical genre include Maurice Morgann's *An Essay on the Dramatic Character of Sir John Falstaff* (1777), Henry Mackenzie's essays on Hamlet in *The Mirror* (1780) and on Falstaff in *The Lounger* (1786), William Richardson's essays on Shakespeare's characters in the 1780s, and Thomas Robertson's *Essay on the Character of Hamlet* (1788). In the Victorian era, Lynch observes, Shakespearean heroines take over from Falstaff and Hamlet as paradigmatic of ethical or psychological character criticism, with Jameson's *Shakespeare's Heroines: Characteristics of Women, Moral, Poetical and Historical* (1832) preceding Mary Cowden Clarke's *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines, in a Series of Tales* (1851). Clarke's projection of the heroines' extra-textual lives has been seen as an extreme example of the kind of criticism L. C. Knights protested in 'How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?' – though as Lynch's analysis of passages from Morgann's 1777 essay demonstrates, the key elements of genre – its styles, its emphases, its aims – were already firmly in place in *belles lettres* literary scholarship of the second half of the eighteenth century. Romantic character criticism, Lynch argues, '*produces* the depth that needs explicating and with it the textual effects that signal the psychological real'.[13] Frow identifies this 'representational' character criticism as the most culturally dominant mode of literary criticism, the one which – with reference to Fredric Jameson's definition of 'ethical' and 'psychological' analysis – 'deals in notions of personal identity, of the quest for self'.[14]

The professionalised academy had come to think of 'character appreciation' as women's (and children's) reading, associating it with the amateur literary debates of women's book clubs and the secularised moral education of English Literature lessons. As Frow puts it, 'the methodology of ethical analysis is, at its simplest (for example in the "character appreciation" that

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 22:37:51, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.004

is at the heart of much of the literature syllabus in secondary schools), the discussion of the moral make-up, the *ethos* of characters, as though they were acquaintances whose virtues and shortcomings one were dissecting'.[15] This idea that people naively discuss fictional characters 'as though they were real people' risks underselling the abilities of secondary school teachers, and the cultural literacy of their pupils, by assuming that readers have not already learned, through their enjoyment and discussion of narrative media, how to talk about real people 'as though they were' more or less sophisticatedly fictive characters. We might also forget how extensively people's personal ethics may actually be derived largely from fictive and historical characters encountered through narrative media, rather than primarily from their direct observation of their acquaintances, or from dedicated religious or ethical instruction.

In the Romantic period's language-games about fictive characters, anti-caricature rhetoric is not used only to judge the verisimilitude of fiction and segregate 'realistic' characters from 'unrealistic' ones. On the one hand, anti-caricature rhetoric describes verisimilitude in literary fiction, saying what is like reality and what is not; on the other hand, anti-caricature rhetoric also articulates why some characters are more pleasurably (or painfully) 'real' than others. Not only denying and distancing 'caricature' but also acknowledging caricature's perverse realism, reading and writing practices engage in a caricature talk that, on the way to establishing the extra-textual 'character' (of the author, their time period, a historical figure, a nation, etc.), problematises fictive 'character' by emphasising authorial technique and talent for characterisation. The vocabulary of caricature talk, whether used pejoratively or not, raises the issue of the novelist's simulated 'reality' as an intervention of style, humour, feeling, personality – and the text as a composition of 'parts', 'marks', 'touches' and 'relations'.

Perhaps talking about characters has been one of the most pleasurable and useful aspects of the novel in large part because we *do* confuse fiction and reality when we engage in it, but not because we are stupid or naive. When readers declare their love for Sir Roger de Coverley or Mr Collins, the vocabulary and rhetoric of caricature talk tends to assume that the 'originality' confusion is a deliberate part of the literary work's form, and that we seem to think, believe and feel things about 'characters' as discrete and credible human entities because writers do more than merely 'record' or 'copy' reality.

While literati in the Romantic period may not have theorised the concept of character in ways acceptable to modern formalist critics, the

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 22:37:51, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.004

conceptual richness of their 'caricature' indicates that romantic faith in fictive characters' potential for 'depths' and 'roundness' has always existed alongside caricature talk's interest in what makes and unmakes the strength of characters' realism.

Prosopographic Caricature in the Romantic Literary Sphere

Critics and writers who extol the superiority of created characters over copied ones do so, in the Romantic period, against a background of prosopographic writing – reviews, biographies, romans à clef and the 'silver fork' novels – that promises insider information about the personal lives of public figures. Some of this writing uses detailed characterisation that highlights its subject's least ideal qualities, including the particulars of their body and physical appearance, simulating the intimacy of personal acquaintance with the individual depicted that was crucial to the perverse realism of amateur caricature drawings and late-Georgian caricature prints.

There are, however, several key differences between pictorial *caricatúra* of real people and textual 'caricatures' of real people, which made it important in the Romantic literary sphere to differentiate the 'reality' of texts' most distinctive characters. For one thing, whereas the caricature print's aesthetic tends to present its portraits as playful burlesques, humorous for the ways in which they distort as much as for the distortion of their subjects, the textuality of 'caricatures' in books and periodicals arguably gives them a stronger claim to candour. Second, prosopographic caricatures were not limited to a small elite group, where personal caricaturing was a mutual social activity and actually contributed to an individual's status; instead, they were imagined to bring the subject before a miscellaneous 'reading public'. Third, prosopographic writing appeared in publication contexts where personal caricature was selective, targeted at certain individuals for particular reasons. Fourth, since detailed prosopography requires a certain level of intimacy with the subject, inevitably writers were most likely to caricature other writers, potentially devaluing their most precious intellectual property, the authorial persona – whether compromising either the authority of an anonymous writer's impersonality, or the attraction of a writer's cultivated individualism. Caricature drawings and prints (mis)represented subjects who were supposed to be 'public' to the viewer in other ways, through social acquaintance, political speeches, ownership and development of land and properties, and news reporting about society and politics. By contrast, textual prosopographic 'caricatures' in books and periodicals could have more impact (psychological and financial)

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 22:37:51, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.004

on a subject whose public reputation consisted primarily of books and periodicals.

What I am calling prosopographic 'caricature' was understood in the Romantic period as a textual representation of an individual character that relies on the author being able to recall first-hand or find out particulars about their subject's figure in society (including their works and deeds, career and connections, speech and manners and/or physical appearance); and which frames some of those particulars as extreme, singular or unflatteringly material; and by which the reader might be able to recognise the real individual by their verbal expression, social behaviour or physical appearance. While some texts vulnerable to the charge of prosopographic caricature restricted their 'particulars' to material that was already published in textual form, or attempted to synthesise prosopographic referents into imaginary characters, others were ready to justify their personal 'attacks' on individual targets.

Here, I examine the Romantic literary sphere's wariness of textual characterisations that meet the criteria for prosopographic caricature just listed, alongside writers' justifications for this style of prosopography – looking at examples from *Blackwood's Magazine* and Peacock's comic symposia, and making points of comparison with Edgeworth's characterisation of John Langan in *Castle Rackrent* and Scott's of David Ritchie in *The Black Dwarf*. Placing caricature talk and anti-caricature rhetoric's emphasis on artistic 'originality' in its social context, I give an account of the notion that distinctive textual characterisations would ideally be limited by propriety and civility, but I also notice when and why it was acceptable for writers to suspend these self-imposed rules.

The literary periodical press in the early nineteenth century used *personality* to mean 'a statement or remark referring to or aimed at a particular person, and usually disparaging or offensive in nature' (OED n. 6b). For a remark to count as a 'personality' in the literary sphere, the person had to be named or otherwise clearly identified, and the statement had to be published, for example in a review of the person's work. Wilson, in *Blackwood's Magazine*, referred to one such review as 'one of those wicked, and we-know-not-what-to-call-them, things, which afflict the spirits of so many of our contemporaries'.[16] The most offensive 'personalities' had a high degree of particularity, and capitalised on some degree of personal acquaintance with the subject as an individual. Writers for literary periodicals were conscious that even their most harshly critical reviews should avoid describing personal traits such as physical appearance and psychological temperament. They were to review writers' works, not the writers themselves.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 22:37:51, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.004

Thus William Blackwood, in 1817, knew that he could seize writers' and readers' attention with uncivil caricatures that disturbed the notion of the literary sphere as a sociable little public of idealists. *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* published some exceptionally personal literary criticism in its first number of October 1817, all of which was unsigned by its authors: John Wilson's review of Coleridge's autobiography *Biographia Literaria*, the first of John Gibson Lockhart's essays on the 'Cockney School of Poetry', and a satire on literary Edinburgh written in pseudo-biblical prose and titled 'A Translation from an Ancient Chaldee Manuscript'. A collaboration between Wilson, Lockhart and Hogg, this account of the rivalry between Blackwood and Archibald Constable, publisher of the *Edinburgh Review*, provoked charges of libel and slander – and even blasphemy – against Blackwell. But all publicity was good publicity. The 'Chaldee Manuscript' defined *Blackwood's* as a uniquely vitriolic publication.[17] Once the first print run sold out, Blackwell made a show of contrition: the number was reissued with a statement of apology, the 'Chaldee Manuscript' removed and the first 'Cockney School' essay heavily revised. Blackwood established a fund in preparation for any future lawsuits, seeming to accept legal fees as part of the cost of doing business, and enshrining over-personal literary criticism in the magazine's modus operandi. Macvey Napier went to the trouble of bringing out an anonymous pamphlet titled *Hypocrisy Unveiled and Calumny Detected in a Review of Blackwood's Magazine*, accusing the reviewers of 'hold[ing] up personal defects, peculiarities, and misfortunes, to ridicule and scorn', and threatening retaliation: 'We know them well—all and each of them,—their names, characters, and schemes.'[18] Scholarship on *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* has emphasised the extremity of its writers' personal attacks on other writers and other periodicals.[19] Yet *Blackwood's* writers did not disregard the taboo against personal criticism, nor did they flout it indiscriminately; rather, they tried to justify their attacks as well-deserved caricatures of particular writers.

Blackwood's reissue of the first number retracts the more personal elements of Lockhart's invective against Leigh Hunt. References to the writer's private character and physical mannerisms are scrupulously removed, redirecting the harshest criticisms from the man to his writings.[20] When Lockhart (signing himself as 'Z') makes another anonymous attack on Hunt's character, he does so more cannily. The third 'Cockney School' essay excuses itself as a critique of Hunt's moral character, where the boundary between private life and public reputation cannot be maintained, because Hunt has already degraded his character in published writing:

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 22:37:51, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.004

> There can be no radical distinction allowed between the private and public character of a poet. If a poet sympathizes with and justifies wickedness in his poetry, he is a wicked man. It matters not that his private life may be free from wicked actions. [. . .] It is therefore of little or no importance, whether Leigh Hunt be or be not a bad private character. [. . .] The world is not fond of ingenious distinctions between the theory and practice of morals. The public are justified in refusing to hear a man plead in favour of his character, when they hold in their hands a work of his in which all respect to character is forgotten.[21]

This statement could be read as a manifesto for *Blackwood's Magazine*'s rebellious approach to literary criticism, or even as an argument for the legitimacy of personal attacks in literary reviewing generally. By Lockhart's reasoning, reviewing a literary work is always a review of its author, and vice versa: it is impossible to avoid commenting on an author's character, when the work's faults are its author's. The statement primes the reader to notice that the insults Z fires at Hunt's muse – claiming to expose her as a painted whore dressed in fashionably 'transparent drapery' – are personal criticisms of Hunt.[22] Lockhart's erasure of the distinction between private and public character might be read not as a deliberate intervention, sincerely meant, in the long-established consensus that personal satire should not feature in the literary sphere, but as a case for highly personal criticism in exceptional cases. Criticism becomes caricature when Lockhart uses a description of Hunt's personal manners and psychology to justify his essay's antagonism towards the poet. Hunt's character is defined by personal antagonism, Z argues: he has an 'irritable temper which keeps [him . . .] in a perpetual fret with himself and all the world beside, and that shews itself equally in his deadly enmities and capricious friendships' (453). Such personal comments were extraordinarily offensive, as Keats understands in a letter to Benjamin Bailey: 'There has been a flaming attack upon Hunt in the Endinburgh [sic] Magazine—I never read anything so virulent—accusing him of the greatest Crimes—dep[r]eciating his Wife his Poetry—his Habits—his company, his Conversation.'[23]

But *Blackwood's* could claim that Hunt had started it. As editor of *The Examiner* and *The Reflector*, Hunt had himself written combative reviews and satires that conflated writers with their works, most notably *The Feast of Poets* (1811). Furthermore, he had been imprisoned for the crimes of seditious and blasphemous libel of the Prince Regent, printing Charles Lamb's 'Triumph of the Whale' in 1812 and his own article 'The Prince on St. Patrick's Day' in 1813.[24] 'The Story of Rimini', a poem Hunt produced while he was in prison and supplied with material by Byron, was

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 22:37:51, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.004

a sympathetic treatment of the historical figure Francesca da Rimini, who is depicted in Dante's *Inferno* as consigned to the second circle of Hell, murdered by her husband after being discovered in bed with his younger brother. Hunt dedicated his poem to Byron. Other readers were less disposed to admire Francesca and Hunt's poem about her, which they could easily interpret as an atheistic endorsement of adultery, incest and lust.[25] As they saw it, sympathetic writing about Francesca da Rimini was pornography barely concealed beneath the respectability of its literary sources. Lockhart's anti-jacobin imagery, which links the immorality of *The Story of Rimini* with Hunt's radical politics, suggests that Z's purportedly general statement is aimed pointedly at Hunt. Z's phrase 'no radical distinction' is a dog whistle for Hunt's republicanism, and implies that praise of Hunt's literary works would be complicit in those radical opinions. It is not just any poet who loses the privilege of privacy, here, but the exceptionally seditious, blasphemous, bilious Hunt.

Blackwood's could also justify personal criticisms of writers who had overreached themselves in search of personal celebrity, obtruding themselves into their writing. The *Blackwood's* writers were not the first in the Romantic period to frame 'caricature' as a means of puncturing a poet's egotism: Henry Brougham's scathing review of *Hours of Idleness* (1807) in the *Edinburgh Review* (which provoked Byron's satire *English Bards, and Scotch Reviewers*) justifies its personal criticisms by remarking that the poems self-promotingly parade Byron's youth and hereditary privilege, 'allud[ing] frequently to his family and ancestors—sometimes in poetry, sometimes in notes'.[26] Romantic poetry of sentiments, when seen to exaggerate the beauties of nature and absurdly elevate the individual's powers of perception and feeling, could strike the cynical reader as being the poet's caricature of himself. Thus Anna Seward objects to lines in Wordsworth's poem 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud' with 'contemptuous astonishment and disgust':

> I read about his dancing daffodils, ten thousand, as he says, in high dance in the breeze beside the river, whose waves dance with them, and in the poet's heart, we are told, danced too. Then he proceeds to say, that in the hours of pensive or of pained contemplation, these same capering flowers flash on his memory, and his heart, losing its cares, dances with them too.
>
> Surely if his worst foe had chosen to caricature this egotistic manufacturer of metaphysic importance upon trivial themes, he could not have done it more effectively![27]

Individualist and confessional writers, addressing their readers in the first person and including biographical information in poems as well as prefaces, were vulnerable to charges of self-importance of a particular kind.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 22:37:51, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.004

De Quincey apologises in his *Confessions* for 'breaking through that delicate and honourable reserve which, for the most part, restrains us from the public exposure of our own errors and infirmities. Nothing, indeed is more revolting to English feelings than the spectacle of a human being obtruding on our notice his moral ulcers or scars'.[28] In the first number of *The Friend*, Coleridge unabashedly calls himself 'the Biographer of my own sentiments', a Romantic self-regard that attracted the scorn of *Blackwood's*.[29] Wilson frames his 1817 review of the *Biographia Literaria* as a just retort to an improperly personal biography that 'lays open, not unfrequently, the character of the Man as well as of the Author'. Coleridge has not understood that it is the job of critics such as Wilson and Lockhart to celebrate authors: he celebrates himself, 'scatter[ing] his Sibylline Leaves around him, with as majestical an air as if a crowd of enthusiastic admirers were rushing forward to grasp the divine promulgations, instead of their being, as they in fact are, coldly received by the accidental passenger, like a lying lottery puff or a quack advertisement'. Coleridge's indecently detailed auto-characterisation contrasts, Wilson thinks, with the 'dignified deportment' of Scott, whose writing makes 'scarcely an allusion [. . .] to himself'.[30]

James Hogg, despite his close involvement with *Blackwood's*, came in for worse treatment when he ventured to publicise the personal history behind his literary works, beginning the third edition of his poetry collection *The Mountain Bard* with 'a Memoir of the Author's Life, written by Himself'. Like Hunt's *Story of Rimini* and Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, the 1821 edition of *The Mountain Bard* was published with its author's name displayed prominently on the title page. The memoir tells how Hogg, ruined by risky investments in farmland, and his reputation as a shepherd undermined by his literary pursuits, was unable to find work locally. Brandishing his rusticity as a mark of his poetry's authenticity, Hogg says that his poems were written 'to please the circles about the fire-sides in the country', that he 'had never been once in any polished society' and at the age of thirty-eight 'knew no more of human life or manners' than as a boy.[31] Candidly (and calculatedly) self-deprecating, the memoir also advertises the poet's acquaintance with important figures on the literary scene, chief among them Byron, Scott and Wilson. Hogg's apparent expectation that his book would be favourably reviewed in the magazine was insulting to Blackwood, who had been surprised to hear that the new edition of *The Mountain Bard* was being published by Oliver and Boyd. Hogg refused to consult with Blackwood about it, believing that Blackwood had no rights in the matter.[32] Wilson's and Blackwood's established friendship with Hogg did not stop them from publishing an

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 22:37:51, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.004

outrageous (and anonymous) review of the new *Mountain Bard*. Focusing on the memoir, Wilson makes an ironic contribution to Hogg's self-promotion as a rustic poet:

> Well, then—this prodigy tires of the shepherd's life, and comes jogging into Edinburgh [. . .]. Only picture to yourself a stout country lout, with a bushel of hair on his shoulders that had not been raked for months, enveloped in a coarse plaid impregnated with tobacco, with a prodigious mouthful of immeasurable tusks, and with a dialect that set all conjecture at defiance, lumbering suddenly in upon the elegant retirement of Mr Miller's back-shop.[33]

The self-styled 'Ettrick shepherd' appears here not as the next Burns but as escaped livestock. Accusing Hogg of 'self-exposure', Wilson employs an extended analogy where Hogg is the living beast, the cook, the waiter and the meat served: 'I take the liberty of sending back Hogg, which has disgusted me more severely than anything I have attempted to swallow since Macvey's Bacon.'[34]

Editorialising the review, however, Wilson claims that 'the playful malice of this "attack"' actually conceals an advertisement for the poet and his work. The author must be a friend of Hogg – or even Hogg himself – stage-managing a public humiliation that whips the poet in order to whip up interest in his book:

> If thou art, as we believe the generality of our readers are, a person endowed with a gentlemanly portion of common sense, and can relish banter and good humour [. . .] thou wilt at once discover that the object of this 'deevilrie,' to use an expression of the Shepherd's, is to add to the interest which his life has excited. Indeed if the paper has not come from Altrive Lake itself, it has certainly been written by some one who takes no small interest in the Shepherd's affairs; for, in the private letter which accompanies it [. . .] a hope is most feelingly expressed, that by this tickling the public sympathy may be awakened, so as to occasion a most beneficial demand for his works, and put a few cool hundreds in his pocket.[35]

On reading Wilson's anonymous review of *The Mountain Bard*, Hogg wrote to Blackwood calling him 'the worst assassin in hell' and informing him that the review had wounded his wife as well as himself: on her 'the blows that you inflict wound deeper and smart with more poignancy, nor can any palliatives that I can use heal them'. Hogg then requested that Blackwood send him the reviewer's name and address.[36] Receiving no response, he sought advice and sympathy from Scott: 'Shall I answer [the reviewer] in print? pursue him at law to which it will soon come if I answer him? or knock out his brains?'[37] Scott's reply advises philosophical reflection:

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 22:37:51, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.004

> I am very sorry to observe from the tenor of your letter that you permitted the caricature in Blackwoods magazine to sit so near your feelings. [. . .] If a man says that I am guilty of some particular fact I would vindicate myself if I could but if he caricatures my person and depreciates my talents I would content myself with thinking that the world will judge of my exterior and of my powers of composition by the evidence of their own eyes and of my works. [. . .] I know the advice to sit quiet under injury is hard to flesh and blood.[38]

As Scott points out, the personal caricature that makes Hogg a grotesque object in a comical situation does not have the satirical precision of a moral critique, as the *Blackwood's* attacks on Hunt do. But Scott's advice to Hogg – to 'sit quiet' – was likely shaped by his own attitude to Hogg as a man rising too far above his social station. Amused by the idea of a man like that participating in an 'affair of honour',[39] Scott probably appreciated the review's image of Hogg as a self-important man comically out of place. Hunt, too, was perceived as a plebeian too full of himself: in the first 'Cockney School' essay, Z describes him as 'a vulgar man [. . .] perpetually labouring to be genteel' and his poetry 'always on the stretch to be grand'.[40]

Indeed, Scott's novel *The Black Dwarf* (1816) and Edgeworth's novel *Castle Rackrent* (1800) show that writers could give themselves permission to relax their rules against caricaturing real people when they found good material in the lower classes. Edgeworth's notebooks, according to Butler, show 'a jackdaw-like attitude towards examples of human behaviour' and speech, particularly among servants, though her only 'conscious, systematic attempt to sketch an individual' was the narrator 'Thady Quirk'.[41] Thady's highly characteristic narration of the events in *Castle Rackrent* originated in Edgeworth's oral mimicry of her father's steward, John Langan, to entertain her family. Edgeworth developed the character by finding appropriate stories to tell in his words.[42] Edgeworth's performances may have included the physical mannerisms that she later used to characterise Thady: she describes in a letter how Langan 'shakes his head, puts up his shoulder, or changes from leg to leg which are all in him sad tokens of distress'.[43] But while Langan's peculiarities made for entertaining dramatic monologues, Edgeworth was displeased with the result of using his idiosyncratic narration for her novel. As Butler points out, Thady 'dominates the book, so that the Rackrents' various doings serve the central aesthetic purpose of revealing his character and attitudes'. Edgeworth 'found it unpalatable', Butler remarks, 'that she had made the quaint, archaic narrator more interesting than the Rackrents [. . .]. Her motives in

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 22:37:51, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.004

taking to fiction were not to act as an amanuensis to John Langan; on the contrary, the viewpoint she wanted to adopt was English and forward-looking'.[44] The Edgeworth family publicly acknowledged that Langan was Thady's 'original', while denying that any of Edgeworth's other characters were portraits of individuals drawn from real acquaintance, despite the novels being strewn with character traits and characteristic incidents referring to the authors' acquaintances. In a letter to her aunt, Edgeworth hashed out a strategy for using their close family friend, James Corry, as the basis for her character 'King Corny' in *Ormond* (1817):

> If you recollect how we used to talk over Mr. Corry & when you used to make me laugh by the hour, we agreed that I might introduce such a character provided I did not make it too like the original—Now I am attempting this—My father [. . .] knows nothing of my plan—therefore I am particularly anxious to know from you how far I may go—and these are my questions—Do you think I may venture to use the handfuls of Hemlock for the gout— [. . .] I shall not put in the blasting—tempting almost irresistably [sic] tempting as it is nor working the goblin tapestry tho' I'd give half a finger for it. [. . .] The chances are that Mr. Corry himself would never read [the] thing unless he were put on the scent.[45]

None of Edgeworth's most distinctive characters were intended as detailed caricature portraits of public or prominent figures, though *Ennui*'s Lord Craiglethorpe was inspired by John Carr's authorship of *Stranger in Ireland* (1806). When characters were intended to represent public personalities with ties to the Edgeworth family, they were flatteringly idealised and often appeared in the role of mentor to the novels' protagonist.[46] However, readers still found ways to see characters as portraits of real people.

Since Thomas Love Peacock's comic symposia were first published, for example, readers have been seeing 'caricatures' in them – but caricatures of who, or what? How do we read the word 'characters' in the *Literary Gazette*'s review of *Nightmare Abbey* in 1818, which describes Peacock's writing as 'a sort of caricature of modern characters and incidents'?[47] In literary scholarship, scores of notes and keys have identified Peacock's characters with real people, until Marilyn Butler's work unsettled the established view of Peacock as a satirist of individuals. While Butler acknowledges that Peacock's symposia do allude to real people, 'his dislike of his period's taste for personality is maintained in his work, and he does not deal in character at all', Gary Dyer comments that Peacock 'avoids the error' of 'scandal-mongering "personal" satire'.[48] Figures previously assumed to be Peacock's renderings of Coleridge, Shelley and Southey as individuals – 'malicious personal portraits' – might be better interpreted,

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 22:37:51, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.004

James Mulvihill suggests, as 'criticisms of the public figure'. Mulvihill has shown that Peacock's characters are often derived from views expressed in print, arguing that 'the Peacockian novel of talk posits a popular culture in which intellectual exchange has been processed for mass consumption'.[49]

This new consensus on Peacockian 'characters' reflects the position Peacock took in the 1830s: he insists in an 1837 selected edition of his symposium novels that he has 'never intruded on the personality of others, nor taken any liberties but with public conduct and public opinions', and reiterates in his 1856 preface to a new edition of *Melincourt* that '[o]f the disputants whose opinions and public characters (for I never trespassed on private life) were shadowed in some of the persons of the story, almost all have passed from the diurnal scene'.[50] At the time Peacock wrote *Crotchet Castle* (1831), Percy Shelley's and Byron's reputations were increasingly sullied by 'tell-all' biographies such as Thomas Moore's *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron* (1830) and Leigh Hunt's *Lord Byron and Some of His Contemporaries* (1828), following Hazlitt's essay 'My First Acquaintance with Poets' (1823) and Thomas Medwin's *Journal of the Conversations of Lord Byron* (1824).[51] Hunt's memoir of Byron crossed a line – it was badly received, and effectively ended his literary career.[52] Describing Byron's physiognomy, Hunt puts together an unflattering portrait of features variously too large, too small and out of place:

> His countenance did not improve with age, and there were always some defects in it. The jaw was too big for the upper part. It had all the wilfulness of a despot in it. The animal predominated over the intellectual part of his head, insamuch as the face altogether was large in proportion to the skull. The eyes also were set too near one another; and the nose, though handsome in itself, had the appearance, when you saw it closely in front, of being grafted on the face, rather than growing properly out of it. His person was very handsome, though terminating in lameness, and tending in fat and effeminacy; which makes me remember what a hostile fair one objected to him, namely, that he had a little beard.[53]

In *Crotchet Castle*, Peacock uses a character called 'Eavesdrop' as a scapegoat for this kind of journalism. The Reverend Folliott confronts him: 'Sir, you have published a character [. . .] wherein you have sketched off me; me, sir, even to my nose and wig. What business have the public with my nose and wig?' Confronting Eavesdrop a second time, Folliott elaborates, 'Sir, my blood boils. What business have the public with my nose and wig? You have dished me up, like a savory omelette, to gratify the appetite of the reading rabble for gossip'.[54] The omelette figures the subject of caricature as an object of consumption, like Wilson's culinary metaphor

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 22:37:51, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.004

for Hogg's mercenary 'dishing up' of himself. Eavesdrop, described by Lady Clarinda as 'a sort of bookseller's tool' who '*coins* all his acquaintances in reminiscences and sketches of character', is eventually expelled from the society of Crotchet Castle, 'a flagitious violator of the confidences of private life'.[55] While Eavesdrop has very few characteristics aside from his speaking name – he is almost totally silent throughout the text – the timing of *Crotchet Castle* suggests an identification with Hunt, as Butler has argued. Peacock certainly avoids caricaturing Hunt with the kind of detail to which Hunt had subjected Byron's memory. In 1837, Peacock echoes Folliott's words about Eavesdrop, noting that 'literary violators of the confidences of private life still gain a disreputable livelihood and an unenviable notoriety'.[56]

Earlier in his career, however, Peacock could not resist including some prosopographic elements in symposia so concerned with the modern intellectual scene. As many scholars have noted, the Scythrop–Marionetta–Celinda love triangle in *Nightmare Abbey* parallels the scandalous story of Percy Shelley, Harriet Westbrook and Mary Godwin. Peacock seems to have deliberately sprinkled the character of Celinda Toobad with physical characteristics unlike Mary Shelley's.[57] Butler sees such instances as the satirist 'careful[ly . . .] blending characteristics in such a way as to frustrate identification with real people'[58] – but not carefully enough, in some cases. Attempts to deliberately frustrate identification could backfire when the identity of the real person was still apparent and personal caricature was aggravated with falsehood. When readers recognised Dickens's character 'Harold Skimpole' as a satirical portrait of Hunt, a friend of Dickens, the character was all the more offensive because Dickens gave Skimpole 'attributes quite foreign to Hunt'[59] – compounding caricature with falsehood, as Scott did with his fictionalisation of David Ritchie, which I discuss later.

There was an established market in the Romantic period for literary works with characters supposedly representing prominent members of society. The 'silver-fork' novels that offered insight into the British aristocracy accompanied by keys to the characters' real identities, were identified by Hazlitt as a distinct literary form in 1827.[60] Middle-class readers could project a 'fashionable' readership who would not need such keys, being already familiar with the 'originals' referenced: in Mary Brunton's 1814 novel *Discipline*, Lady St Edmunds 'kill[s] the time' by reading 'novels enriched with slanderous tales or caricatures of living characters' and 'fashionable sonnets, guarded to the ear of decency'.[61] Silver-fork novels like Lady Caroline Lamb's *Glenarvon* (1816) and Eaton Stannard

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 22:37:51, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.004

Barett's *Six Weeks at Long's* (1817) commodified upper-class gossip for a largely middle-class audience – or at least commodified the idea of upper-class gossip. In *Crotchet Castle*, Lady Clarinda decides to earn herself some pocket money for 'trinkets and fal-lals, which I cannot get from papa' by writing a cynical silver-fork novel that only pretends to caricature real 'originals':

LADY CLARINDA. [. . .] You must know I have been reading several fashionable novels, the fashionable this, and the fashionable that; and I thought to myself, why I can do better than any of these myself. So I wrote a chapter or two, and sent them as a specimen to Mr Puffall, the bookseller, telling him they were to be a part of the fashionable something or other, and he offered me, I will not say how much, to finish it in three volumes, and let him pay all the newspapers for recommending it as the work of a lady of quality, who made very free with the characters of her acquaintance.

CAPTAIN FITZCHROME. Surely you have not done so?

LADY CLARINDA. Oh, no; I leave that to Mr Eavesdrop. But Mr Puffall made it a condition that I should let him say so.

CAPTAIN FITZCHROME. A strange recommendation.

LADY CLARINDA. Oh, nothing else will do.[62]

Peacock would have known about the controversy over Benjamin Disraeli's *Vivian Grey* (1826), puffed by publisher Henry Colburn as 'the adventures of an ambitious, dashing, and talented young man of high life' and representing 'nearly all the individuals at present figuring in fashionable society'. Colburn stoked interest in the novel by telling an editor that '[t]he authorship is a great secret – a man of high fashion – very high – keeps the first society'.[63] Peacock imagines a publisher, 'Puffall', who falsely advertises Lady Clarinda's text as a modern roman à clef, when she actually intends to imagine her characters. This dilettante, though choosing to capitalise on her 'fashionable' aristocratic identity, disdains her readers' literal-minded interest in identifying real characters – an interest stoked by novels that did use elements of what was publicly known about real people.

The success in Dublin of Edgeworth's *Leonora* (1806), for example, was driven by identifications of the characters with the real individuals Lady Asgill, Lord Moira and Lady Morgan. Edgeworth could not deny that she had been inspired by stories about Lady Morgan (previously Sydney Owenson), though she was grateful to Lovell Sneyd for trying to counter the idea that the portrait was based on personal acquaintance: 'Thank you my dear brother for saying that I never saw Miss Owenson.'[64] When novelists used documentary material, they piqued the interest of literal-minded (but often insightful) readers. In Lady Morgan's own novel *Florence Macarthy* (1818), the writer Lady Clancare laments readers'

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 22:37:51, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.004

literal-mindedness when she remarks that 'combine qualities as you may, to the very verge of extravagance, the world will furnish models, trace likenesses, and assign originals'[65] – an ironic statement, given that Morgan wants readers to recognise the character 'Con Crawley' as a dig at John Wilson Croker, in revenge for his excoriating review of her 1817 account of France in the early years of the Bourbon Restoration. On the other hand, readers' identifications did sometimes make connections irrelevant to what the author could have conceivably intended. Sydney Smith erroneously took Edgeworth's clergyman character 'Buckhurst Falcolner' in *Patronage* (1814) as an offensive caricature of himself, writing in a letter that '[i]f [Edgeworth] has put into her Novels people who fed her and her odious father, she is not Trustworthy' – though Edgeworth had not known him when she wrote the novel.[66]

But with Thady, there could be no such social consequences. A comic caricature of a lowborn caretaker could not hurt feelings or damage reputations among her peers, so Edgeworth was happy to avow it.

Similarly, Scott was unrepentant about his use of David Ritchie, writing about the 'inspiration' for the character Sir Edward Mauley (or 'Canny Elshie') at length in the Magnum Introduction to *The Black Dwarf*. Scott's information about Ritchie was drawn partly from the anecdotes of Adam Fergusson, whose house was local to Ritchie's cottage and whom Scott was visiting when he had his own personal encounter with the hermit: 'The author saw this poor, and, it may be said, unhappy man, in autumn 1797.'[67] The introduction also draws on Robert Chambers's essay 'The Life and Anecdotes of the Black Dwarf, or David Ritchie' (1820), which had been published to capitalise on readers' interest in the titular character of Scott's novel. Scott's use of other people's anecdotes for the Magnum Introduction suggests that he merely 'saw' Ritchie, perhaps at a distance, and had to rely on descriptions for details such as '"his screech-owl voice, shrill, uncouth, and dissonant, [which] corresponded well with his other peculiarities'.[68] Still, Scott congratulates himself, the novel's 'personal description' of the dwarf 'has been generally allowed to be a tolerably exact and unexaggerated portrait' of the real David Ritchie.[69] This should have been recognised as an unscrupulous use of a real person to create a fictive character, and Scott's claim that 'an individual existed many years since [. . .] which suggested such a character' does not tally with the fact that Ritchie died only a few years before the novel was published.[70]

Scott admits that the interest stirred up by *The Black Dwarf* (which inspired several further publications about Ritchie), caused suffering to the sister who lived next to Ritchie in a cottage he built for her:

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 22:37:51, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.004

> [T]he author is sorry to learn that a sort of 'local sympathy,' and the curiosity then expressed concerning the Author of Waverley and the subjects of his Novels, exposed the poor woman to enquiries which gave her pain. When pressed about her brother's peculiarities, she asked, in her turn, why they would not permit the dead to rest?[71]

Here, Scott fails to take responsibility for his appropriation of Ritchie's life in a characterisation that uses so much detailed anecdotal material, yet combines it with fabricated episodes including Mauley's revelation of his true identity. The character is so barely fictitious that these additions become more like falsehoods than fictions. Scott might have reflected on why he never borrowed so much personal detail from a real individual, particularly one so recently living, in any of his other novels. Instead, the Introduction explicitly understates the novel's reliance on a real character – 'not altogether imaginary' – even while using anecdotes about the real 'Black Dwarf' to stoke interest in Scott's characterisation: 'The ideal being who is here presented as residing in solitude, and haunted by a consciousness of his own deformity, and a suspicion of his being generally subjected to the scorn of his fellow-men, is not altogether imaginary.'[72] Reading the anecdotes that follow, and comparing them with the descriptions in the narrative, it is hard to see the Black Dwarf as more 'ideal' than real. Scott seems unaware of the irony that his novel proves Ritchie's suspicions about society and violates the seclusion that sustained his existence: Scott actually recounts that Ritchie sought 'the least possible communication with the world' after years of wandering, finding no society where he could be free of 'disagreeable attention'. The Magnum Introduction reinscribes the novel's memorialisation of Ritchie through Mauley, effectively making sure that Ritchie will forever be 'the Black Dwarf'. Ritchie the brushmaker was not thought of as a peer: his class and his parochialism, as well as his physical differences, meant for Scott that Ritchie's peculiarities were fair game for caricature, though it was unfortunate that people got hurt.

While writers typically named their characters carefully so as to avoid strong identification with living individuals, avoiding prosopographic characterisation took on a performative aspect in realist fiction. Novelists begin using the elliptical long dash, which had been common in satires on real individuals,[73] as a way of forestalling the reader's identifying a character with a specific referent while giving the impression that there *is* a real, unmentionable referent. For example, in *Pride and Prejudice*, Mrs. Philips tells her nieces that Mr. Wickham 'was to have a lieutenant's commission in the—shire [regiment]'.[74] Dashes are used to redact the names of counties, towns and institutions entirely or in part, and also to redact

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 22:37:51, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.004

digits from dates. Such redactions presumably were expedient for writers, since to plot a highly specific timeline or to map a narrative accurately onto real geography would be time-consuming, as well as inviting quibbles from pedantic readers. Elliptical punctuation could also play a role in bolstering the novel's claims to universalism.

But by performatively discouraging readers from identifying referents while hinting that such identifications might actually be possible, formal realism can have it all: specificity *and* universality, authenticity *and* fictionality. The opening lines of *The Warden* (1855) give an extended performance of this magic trick, where the particulars are made real by their concealment. Trollope sets his scene 'in the cathedral town of ————————; let us call it Barchester. Were we to name it Wells or Salisbury, Exeter, Hereford, or Gloucester, it might be presumed that something personal was intended; and as this tale will refer mainly to the cathedral dignitaries of the town in question, we are anxious that no personality may be suspected'.[75] This passage can be read as both scrupulous and coy, with the narrator never stating outright that the story contains nothing personal; instead, our attention is diverted to what 'might be presumed' or 'may be suspected'. From Scott's presentation of the Black Dwarf as an 'ideal being [. . .] not altogether imaginary' to Trollope's 'let us call it Barchester', realisms take different routes to establishing an ambiguous 'originality' that insists on the writer's power to create imaginatively 'original' characters, while pretending to withhold the identity of a real being that is 'original' in the sense of pre-existing the text.

In caricature talk and anti-caricature rhetoric, readers and writers play, interminably, with the interchangeability of these 'originals'. Realism is a play space where we can both pretend to be deceived into thinking that fictions are real, and pretend to be deceived into thinking that real things are fiction. Anti-caricature rhetoric's practised denial of caricature participates in this play when it pushes resemblance towards equivalence, a controlled exertion that holds novelistic character in a state of neither real nor false.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 22:37:51, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.004