CHAPTER 3

Caricature Talk and the Spectator

The fictitious characters created by Joseph Addison and Richard Steele in *The Spectator* (1711–12) became, over the course of the eighteenth century and more than fifty collected editions, Britain's gold standard for comic characterisation in literary prose. This chapter describes the Romantic-period novel's inheritance from the *Spectator*'s characters and their critical reception. I argue that the *Spectator*, first published a century before *Northanger Abbey* found fault with its 'improbable circumstances, unnatural characters', has a strong claim to being the text that most definitively established the terms of caricature talk about 'strong characters' – fictive non-protagonist characters who were distinctive, individualised, comic and satirically rendered – for the Romantic period.

The *Spectator*'s character-writing, I argue, sets 'diversion', 'originality' and 'realism' as key topics for the Romantic period's critical discourse about strong characterisation in the 'light literature' of novels and literary periodicals. Addison and Steele define these topics in several ways: self-reflexive comments about character-writing and character-reading, a hyperbolised distinction between satire and libel, innovative characterisation techniques in their quasi-Theophrastan 'characters', and development of individualised non-protagonist characters such as 'the Spectator' and 'Will Honeycomb'. I examine how Steele and Addison, departing from the conventions and the moral-satirical commitment of the Theophrastan character, model the characterisation of a strong character: a fictitious being that evokes, through particularity and contrast, the 'originality' of a real individual, with virtual reality offering the reader pseudo-sensory and parasocial pleasure.

Half a century after the *Spectator*'s original publishing, the critical reception of Addison and Steele's character 'Sir Roger De Coverley' became an important influence on the critical appreciation and writing of strong characters in new novels. I argue that the discourse around 'Sir Roger' in the second half of the eighteenth century was an early and

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 02:48:15, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.005

formative example of the caricature talk distinctive from psychologising 'character appreciations' such as Henry Mackenzie's *Remarks on the Character of Falstaff* (1786). While Steele and Addison's collaboration on Sir Roger De Coverley was likened to literature's most famous comic knights – Don Quixote and Falstaff – it was the *Spectator* and 'Sir Roger' that offered fresh inspiration for writers seeking to enrich the modern English realist novel with non-protagonist characters both contemporary and historical. Considering a selection of examples – from Samuel Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* (1779) to Lionel Thomas Berguer's *British Essayists* (1823) – I find that the critical reception of Sir Roger not only cemented the *Spectator*'s reputation for characters, but also conventionalised and added to the existing critical vocabulary that became prevalent in anti-caricature rhetoric for the praise of strong characters. I suggest that Sir Roger's critical reception would have impressed readers and writers with the potential of non-protagonist characters to be uniquely luxurious and durable assets – a good investment for commercial authors seeking to build and sustain a readership.

Chapter 3 concludes by imagining the *Spectator*'s model for strong characters and the vocabulary and ideas generated by caricature talk about the *Spectator* as elements of character-writing that were re-purposed and re-contextualised by different novelistic realisms. The *Spectator*'s precepts and methods – and their critical reception in the 1770s–1820s – are variously refracted in the distinctive formal realisms represented over the subsequent three chapters. I end this chapter by noticing some ways in which Austen's comic moral realism, Scott's compendious historical realism and Shelley's materialist horror realism transpose elements from the *Spectator*'s precedent, taking them in new and genre-defining directions.

Diversions, Originals and Particulars

In early nineteenth-century Britain, it would have been remarkable for a leisured reader never to have picked up the *Spectator* in some form. Over the eighteenth century, dozens of collected and selected editions of the essays had capitalised on the immediate success of the periodical publication, creating an intellectual property of immense commercial value. By 1767, the *Spectator*'s market value stood at £1,228 – far exceeding prices obtained in the 1760s for other modern English texts, such as *Robinson Crusoe* (£68), *Pilgrim's Progress* (£196) and even *Paradise Lost* (£900).[1] In the Romantic period, the *Spectator*'s inclusion in publishers' series of 'English classics' with low prices and long print runs ensured that the

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 02:48:15, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.005

Spectator was read more and more widely.[2] The *Spectator* and *Tatler* essays headed the 'English classics', a canon of moral didactic literature extracted from periodicals including *The Tatler*, *The Rambler* and *The Mirror*. In a climate of increased worry about the dangers of reading, the *Spectator* was 'safe' – and so was its literary reputation.

Addison and Steele had explicitly targeted a female readership, and their essays became ubiquitous reading material provided to young readers and to women, even at a point when Addisonian essays of morals and manners began to show their age. In *Northanger Abbey*, Austen imagines a young lady being admired for reading the *Spectator*, rather than a novel, even though the *Spectator*'s manners are outdated:

> 'And what are you reading, Miss—?' 'Oh! It is only a novel! [. . .] It is only Cecilia, or Camilla, or Belinda'; or, in short, only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour, are conveyed to the world in the best-chosen language. Now, had the same young lady been engaged with a volume of the Spectator, instead of such a work, how proudly would she have produced the book, and told its name; though the chances must be against her being occupied by any part of that voluminous publication, of which either the matter or manner would not disgust a young person of taste: the substance of its papers so often consisting in the statement of improbable circumstances, unnatural characters, and topics of conversation which no longer concern anyone living; and their language, too, frequently so coarse as to give no very favourable idea of the age that could endure it.[3]

Austen had a point – sociolinguistic norms had changed, society had changed, expectations of women had changed, and young ladies were more likely to find examples relevant to their situations in novels by Fanny Burney, Maria Edgeworth or Mary Brunton than in the *Spectator* or the *Tatler*.

Nevertheless, these novelists had a considerable inheritance from the *Spectator* model of characterisation. As well as suggesting characterisation techniques for the writing of comic non-protagonist characters to enrich a plot-driven novel, the *Spectator* cultivated readers' appreciation of such characters as 'original' and 'natural'.

Post-romantic literary scholarship is suspicious of character criticism's tendency – in professing to respond to characters as though they were people and attributing characters' verisimilitude to the 'genius' of a god-like author – to elide the historical specifics of the writer's knowledge and concept of the world, and the formal ways in which characterisation

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 02:48:15, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.005

conveys that knowledge to readers. In the case of the *Spectator*'s characters, modern formalist literary criticism has assigned Addison and Steele's character-writing to a particular moral didactic genre, the 'character sketch'. Theresa Shön writes that character sketches 'are containers of knowledge – social, satirical or religious, in any case moral', that 'the genre was employed to classify and thus to order the virtues and vices', and that Addison and Steele used the genre 'to convey knowledge on the moral and social nature of human beings'.[4] Deriving from the *Characters* of Theophrastus (c. 371–287 BCE), the seventeenth-century character sketch is a classically satirical genre that explicitly claims to educate and correct readers by showing portraits of imaginary individuals whose behaviours illustrate a range of moral failings and ill manners. In Joseph Healey's 1628 translation, Theophrastus's opening proem hopes 'that our children will prove the honester and better conditioned, if we shall leave them good precedents of imitation: that of good children they may prove better men'.[5] The fourth English-language edition of Jean de la Bruyère's *Caractères*, the most famous imitation of Theophrastus's *Characters*, opens with the promise that '[t]he World may view the Picture I have drawn of it from Nature, and if I have hit on any defects, which it agrees with me to be such, it may at leisure correct them'.[6] The Theophrastan characterologist assumes, or pretends to assume, that his reader needs to be taught how to recognise a bad character, so that the reader can avoid the real person who resembles it, and avoid becoming part of that person's society, with the imitation and conciliation that society involves. Thus, the *Spectator*, like de la Bruyère's *Caractères*, declares its aim 'to Cultivate and Polish Human Life, by promoting Virtue and Knowledge' – in the preface to the first collected volume, dedicated to Whig statesman John Somers (1651–1716) as 'a Person of a finished Character'.[7]

However, in the periodical publication of the *Spectator*, Addison does not describe the essays as 'instructive' until the tenth number – and there, the idea of the *Spectator* as corrective literature is comically undermined by the 'Spectator' character's baser motives. Addison presents the *Spectator*'s narrator, for the reader's amusement, as a writer pleased by the success of his own new publication. Imagining a large and deferential readership for his future writings, the Spectator attempts to flatter readers with the idea of themselves as a select group of 'Disciples'; and he assures them, in ironically elevated language, of his publication's value as a moral pharmaceutical to be taken daily:

> It is with much Satisfaction that I hear this great City inquiring Day by Day after my Papers, and receiving my Morning Lectures with a becoming Seriousness and Attention. My Publisher tells me, that there are already

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 02:48:15, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.005

> Three Thousand of them distributed every Day: So that if I allow Twenty Readers to every paper, which I look upon as a modest Computation, I may reckon about Threescore thousand Disciples in *London* and *Westminster*, who I hope will take care to distinguish themselves from the thoughtless Herd of their ignorant and unattentive Brethren. Since I have raised to myself so great an Audience, I shall spare no Pains to make their Instruction agreeable, and their Diversion useful. For which Reasons I shall endeavour to enliven Morality with Wit, and to temper Wit with Morality [. . .]. And to the End that [readers'] Virtue and Discretion may not be short transient intermitting Starts of Thought, I have resolved to refresh their Memories from Day to Day, till I have recovered them out of that desperate State of Vice and Folly, into which the Age is fallen. The Mind that lies fallow but a single Day, sprouts up in Follies that are only to be killed by a constant and assiduous Culture. [. . .] I would therefore in a very particular Manner recommend these my Speculations to all well-regulated Families, that set apart an Hour in every Morning for Tea and Bread and Butter; and would earnestly advise them for their Good to order this Paper to be punctually served up, and to be looked upon as a Part of the Tea Equipage (*S* no. 10, Addison).

This is the morality of someone trying to sell something. The *Spectator* purports to serve a universally appealing combination of 'Morality', 'Civility' and 'Diversion' – rather than the 'Party' and 'Politics' that divide its potential readership. The *Spectator*'s ironical self-fashioning as an innocuously educational and non-partisan publication astutely combines Addison and Steele's underlying political concerns with a comically exaggerated portrait of non-partisanship. Neutral in all things, the Spectator character's 'exact Neutrality between the Whigs and the Tories' is one manifestation of his refusal to participate in any sphere or activity: 'I have acted in all the parts of my Life as a Looker-on, which is the Character I intend to preserve in this Paper' (*S* no. 1, Addison). He opens his mouth so seldom that he is able to quantify his spoken words with remarkable precision, claiming that 'during the Space of eight Years' at university, 'I scarce uttered the Quantity of an hundred Words; and indeed do not remember that I ever spoke three Sentences together in my whole Life' (no. 1), and confessing that he 'ha[s] indulged [his] Silence to such an Extravagance' that friends have to deduce opinions from his facial expressions (*S* no. 4, Steele). By presenting the Spectator's political neutrality not as an abstract virtue but as the comical peculiarity of an odd-mannered man, the early numbers of the *Spectator* are calculated to divert and flatter readers regardless of politics and religion.

First, the Spectator's comic auto-characterisation promises the reader – who is presumably already inundated with sermons and conduct

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 02:48:15, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.005

literature – a novel narrator whose ostentatiously 'instructive' satires on manners and politics will be continually lightened with comic irony. Second, the irony of the salesman's pitch flatters the reader's critical understanding of consumerism and the commercialisation of literature, thus selling the *Spectator* more persuasively to readers who know they are being sold to. Third, the deliberately comic characterisation of neutrality flatters the knowledge of the distrustful and politically astute reader who might well have discerned, behind the pretence of non-partisanship, what the magazine's political project might be in the 1710s. The Whigs were out of favour with Queen Anne and had gone into opposition. Brian Cowan argues that the *Spectator*'s political neutrality was a pose, a strategy for a distinctively Whiggish social reform project aiming to reform and discipline practices of public sociability such as newspaper reading and political debate in coffeehouses.[8] 'The object of this reformation was not the perpetuation of a rational public sphere', writes Cowan, but the 'construct[ion of] a social world that was amenable to the survival of Whig politics during a time in which the future of Whiggery was unclear'.[9]

Part of the *Spectator*'s strategy to endear its project to a broader audience – to become a favourite with all parties – is that Addison and Steele's pretence to non-partisanship is continuous with their comic auto-characterisation of it. The *Spectator*'s characters do, of course, refract various forms of knowledge about the readers' world. But if we understand the *Spectator*'s humour merely as a pleasing cover for moral earnestness or political strategy, we risk overlooking the extent to which Addison and Steele, through comic characterisation, problematise their own claim to serve 'Morality' with 'Wit' and lower the value of doing so. The *Spectator*'s characters and auto-characterisation, I argue, make 'Diversion' a valuable good in itself. Imagining its papers as innocuous consumer objects, part of the tea service, the *Spectator* speculates a provisionally depoliticised 'civil' society where all ideas and ideals can be 'characterised' into eccentricities – where opinionated and public-minded citizens are continually diverted away from political concerns, and into good humour with each other. For the Spectator, comically peculiar characters are sport, not instruction – 'Odd and uncommon Characters are the Game that I look for, and most delight in' (no. 108, Addison) – and it is a social sport, with novel characters exchanged between friends. One fictitious 'letter to the editor' begs the Spectator, 'Give me Leave to make you a Present of a Character not yet described in your Papers' (no. 194, Steele); another letter begins by addressing him as 'the greatest Sportsman, or, if you please, the Nimrod among this Species of Writers' (no. 371, Addison).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 02:48:15, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.005

The fictive originals of light literature thus use characterology for diversion, welcoming readers to a 'great Field of Game' (no. 131, Addison) where they can safely indulge their aggressive tendencies to sport with real people's characters. There, readers might be free both from the authority of serious moral satire, and from the risks of libellous, politically motivated satires on real individuals – so long as the sportsmen manage to confine their fire to their intended imaginary targets.

For commercial imaginative literature including the novel, the *Spectator* suggested how fictive characters could create civilised (and civilising) diversions as a compelling alternative to divisive satire and gossip. To achieve this supposed aim, characters had to be 'original' in the sense of not being copied from real people in ways that would be recognisable to readers. Here, the reader is made responsible for fictionality: they must curb any tendency to recognise real people in imaginative works and they must cultivate respect for the author's imagination. The reader must believe that 'Odd and uncommon Characters' like the *Spectator*'s (no. 108, Addison) can substantially originate in an author's mind. In other words, they must believe that in a judgement on the work's fictionality, the imagination and assemblage involved in character-writing are more significant than elements based on direct observation. Addison and Steele thus model character originality for their readers as well as for aspiring writers: they suggest that, to be safely diverted by innocently original and fictitious characters, readers must enter a compact with the writer. To accept characters' fictionality, and to admire their originality, is to be a more sophisticated reader – unlike the literal-minded man in one of the Spectator's anecdotes, who glosses the original characters of imaginative literature with his own pet hates:

> A Man who has a good Nose at Innuendo, smells Treason and Sedition in the most innocent Words that can be put together, and never sees a Vice or Folly stigmatized, but finds out one or other of his Acquaintance pointed at by the Writer. I remember an empty pragmatical Fellow in the Country, who upon reading over *the whole Duty of Man*, had written the Names of several Persons in the Village at the Side of every Sin which is mentioned by that excellent Author; so that he had converted one of the best Books in the World into a Libel against the Squire, Church-wardens, Overseers of the Poor, and all the most considerable Persons in the Parish (no. 568, Addison).

Readers, Addison suggests, can libel as badly as writers; and the *Spectator* makes a show of trusting its readers, for their intellectual sophistication, their discretion and – by association with their faith in the author's originality – their powers of imagination.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 02:48:15, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.005

Not being Romantics, Addison and Steele do not speak of 'originality', 'imagination' or 'creativity' in positive terms; rather, these faculties are implied in statements about the importance of abstraction, generalisation, qualification and avoidance in character-writing. The Spectator, for example, 'must [. . .] intreat every Particular Person, who does me the Honour to be a Reader of this Paper, never to think himself, or any one of his Friends or Enemies, aimed at in what is said: For I promise him, never to draw a faulty Character which does not fit at least a Thousand People' (no. 34, Addison). The reader must be able to entertain the notion that a peculiar character is particular enough to belong to a real person, yet still have the status of an abstracted and generalised 'it':

> When I meet with any vicious Character that is not generally known, in order to prevent its doing Mischief, I draw it at length, and set it up as a Scarecrow; by which means I do not only make an Example of the Person to whom it belongs, but give Warning to all Her Majesty's Subjects, that they may not suffer by it (no. 205, Addison).

Steele offers more detail on character-writing as an effortful editorial process of avoidance and addition – avoiding too-particular resemblances and adding details that deliberately frustrate character-person identification:

> I believe my Reader would [. . .] think the better of me, if he knew the Pains I am at in qualifying what I write after such a manner, that nothing may be interpreted as aimed at private Persons. For this Reason when I draw any faulty Character, I consider all those Persons to whom the Malice of the World may possibly apply it, and take care to dash it with such particular Circumstances as may prevent all such ill-natured Applications. If I write any Thing on a black Man, I run over in my Mind all the eminent Persons in the Nation who are of that Complection: When I place an imaginary Name at the Head of a Character, I examine every Syllable and Letter of it, that it may not bear any Resemblance to one that is real (no. 262, Steele).

Here, the emphasis is not on character-writing as a 'creative' endeavour, but on the necessity of examining one's 'exemplary' characters against an index of real ones.

It is not until the caricature talk of Romantic character criticism – developed in part through the critical reception of the *Spectator*'s characters – that characters' 'originality' takes a positive form. James Edward Austen-Leigh's memoir, for example, does not trouble to defend Austen's characters by claiming that she 'avoided' caricaturing real people or deliberately 'dashed' characteristics with circumstances. Instead, he trusts readers to believe that Austen could actually *originate* characters, could 'create' them and 'invest' them with qualities:

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 02:48:15, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.005

> She did not copy individuals, but invested her own creations with individuality of character. [. . .] Her own relations never recognised any individual in her characters; and I can call to mind several of her acquaintance whose peculiarities were very tempting and easy to be caricatured of whom there are no traces in her pages. She herself, when questioned on the subject by a friend, expressed a dread of what she called such an 'invasion of social proprieties.' She said that she thought it fair to note peculiarities and weaknesses, but that it was her desire to create, not to reproduce; 'besides,' she added, 'I am too proud of my gentlemen to admit that they were only Mr. A. or Colonel B.'[10]

While Austen's remark about her own writing has a note of self-deprecation, it is clear that the idea of 'originality' in character-writing has gained ground, such that it makes sense to speak in proprietary terms of '*my* gentlemen', and that originality eclipses 'observation' as a talent beneficial to characterisation technique. Whereas Addison and Steele speak of abstract characters potentially 'belonging' to real people (*S* no. 205), Romantic character criticism speaks of imaginary characters belonging securely to authors – and then to readers.

This is not to say that Augustan character-writers did not find ways of expressing pride in their 'originality'. I suggest that caricature talk's emphasis on the character-writer's creative energy is latent in early eighteenth-century literature, in moments when imaginative comic writers – Swift, Hogarth and Fielding as well as Addison and Steele – auto-characterise their satirical personae as proud of their moral rectitude. Rather than pride himself on his originality, Addison's characterologist finds self-regard in being above personal satire: 'I know very well the Value which every Man sets upon his Reputation, and how painful it is to be exposed to the Mirth and Derision of the Publick, and should therefore scorn to divert my Reader, at the Expence of any private Man' (no. 262). Sociability and civility, not queen and country, are at stake in these characterisations. In Addison's comic anecdote about *The Whole Duty of Man*, the innuendo-sniffer's marginalia is discovered and causes uproar in his village, but there is no material disturbance to the wider political or religious order. The 'Libel' only disrupts the peace of sociability, and lowers the man's value as a candidate for social acquaintance.

But while the stakes are relatively low, Augustan writers often describe the risks in strong language more suited to seditious libel than the comic characterisation of private individuals. Addison's mock-heroic language makes a joke of the Spectator's strenuous insistence on the difference between 'satire' and 'libel', transmuting the author's pride in their

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 02:48:15, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.005

characters' originality into the character's excessive pride in his scrupulousness. For example, the *Spectator*'s denunciation of libellous satires and gossip, while expressed in dramatic imagery and grandiose language, boils down to some advice on how to be a good friend and not hurt people's feelings, even when they pretend to be unaffected by gossip:

> There is nothing that more betrays a base, ungenerous Spirit, than the giving of secret Stabs to a Man's Reputation. Lampoons and Satyrs, that are written with Wit and Spirit, are like poison'd Darts, which not only inflict a Wound, but make it incurable. For this Reason I am very much troubled when I see the Talents of Humour and Ridicule in the Possession of an ill-natured Man. There cannot be a greater Gratification to a barbarous and inhuman Wit, than to stir up Sorrow in the Heart of a private Person, to raise Uneasiness among near Relations, and to expose whole Families to Derision, at the same time that he remains unseen and undiscovered. If, besides, a Man is vicious into the bargain, he is one of the most mischievious Creatures that can enter into a Civil Society. [. . .] It is impossible to enumerate the Evils which arise from these Arrows that fly in the dark. [. . .] For my part, I would never trust a Man that I thought was capable of giving these secret Wounds, and cannot but think that he would hurt the Person, whose Reputation he thus assaults, in his Body or in his Fortune, could he do it with the same Security (no. 23, Addison).

And so on. Addison putatively aims this advice at publishing writers, the satirists most capable of concealing themselves from their victims – but it is also a comically overwritten and characteristic speech advertising the Spectator's own merits as an inoffensive and imaginative author. If the Spectator claims to be having 'Serious Thoughts' about the innumerable evils of libellous mockery, Addison is not presenting them seriously.

Readers might have recalled the bombastic speech in Thomas Randolph's play *The Muse's Looking Glass* (1706), where the demonic figure of 'Satyre' exults over his victims in a rapid mixing of metaphors – freezing, cutting, cooking, whipping, scarring, infecting and ulcerating:

> When I but frown'd in my Lucilius Brow,
> Each conscious Cheek grew Red, and a cold trembling
> Freez'd the chill Soul; while every guilty Breast
> Stood fearful of Dissection, as afraid
> To be anatomiz'd by that skilful Hand;
> And have each Artery, Nerve, and Vein of Sin
> By it laid open to the publick Scorn.
> I have untrussed the proudest; greatest Tyrants
> Have quak'd below my powerful Whip, half dead
> With Expectation of the smarting Jerk,

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 02:48:15, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.005

> Whose Wound no salve can cure: each blow doth leave
> A lasting Scar, that with a Poyson eats
> Into the Marrow of their Fames and Lives;
> Th' eternal Ulcer to their Memories![11]

While numerous texts of the 'Augustan' literary era condemn libellous intentions as a perversion of satire, they generally do not use the kind of overblown language and cumulative style that Randolph and Addison put in the mouths of their self-important characters. In cooler terms, writers deplore 'Invectives', 'Slander' and the 'real Names [that] turn Satyr to abuse', and they approve satire 'pointed at the *Vice* more than at the *Man*', without referring to poisoned arrows or physical assaults.[12] Contrastingly, professionals who, like the 'Spectator' character, want to foreground their own inventive talents, emphasise the supposed high-mindedness of their own satire with more sensational and more particular images like those used by Randolph's Satyre. Captioning his painting *Midnight Modern Conversation* in 1732, Hogarth advises his audience 'not to find one meant resemblance there / We lash the vices but the persons spare'. Fielding's narrator, digressing from the plot in *Joseph Andrews* (1742), describes the satirist as someone who corrects faults in private, 'like a parent', the libeller as someone who punishes them in public, 'like an executioner'.[13] These parallels are reworked from a passage in the *Tatler* where Steele's 'Isaac Bickerstaff' persona laments how the concepts of satire and libel are 'promiscuously joined together in the Notions of the Vulgar', whereas actually 'the Satyrist and the Libeller differ as much as the Magistrate and the Murderer' (*T* no. 92). Swift, in his obituary for himself, celebrates the accuracy of his aim as a satirist in jaunty rhyming couplets: 'malice never was his aim; / He lash'd the vice, but spared the name; / No individual could resent, / Where thousands equally were meant'.[14]

Are Hogarth, Swift and Fielding genuinely concerned that their comical characterisations might be taken for personal satires? Are they genuinely claiming that they create imaginary characters primarily so that their works can have more universal effect on society's morals? I read these Augustan denunciations of libel and *ad hominem* argument, with their mock-heroic imagery of lashing and stabbing and poisoning, as ironic auto-characterisations after Addison and Steele's 'Spectator' and 'Bickerstaff' characters. They celebrate the author's genius for original characterisation not with earnest condemnations of libel, but by participating in a comic tradition of hyperbolising the social evils of 'unoriginal' characters.

The caricature talk of Romantic character criticism, while writers still insist on the innocent originality of their characters, conventionally

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 02:48:15, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.005

suggests that a peculiar and amusing character is so well-characterised that it must be a description of a real individual. In this permutation of the language-game of 'character talk', to use Moi's term, readers pay tribute to authors' talents for characterisation by affecting to believe that the character is *not* original. Sometimes a critic recounts how other readers have identified the character with a real person, the actual 'original' on whom the character might be based. In his essay on Austen's novels for the *Quarterly Review*, for example, Scott tells how '[a] friend of ours, whom [Austen] never saw or heard of, was at once recognized by his own family as the original of Mr. Bennet, and we do not know if he has yet got rid of the nickname'.[15]

Often for readers, however, the 'originals' of characters are ideal beings, merely imagined and 'felt' to pre-exist the author's work, as in Francis Jeffrey's review of *Waverley*. A cursory reading of the essay in the *Edinburgh Review* might suggest that Jeffrey is praising Scott for the opposite of originality in his depictions of the lower classes: after all, he notes 'the extraordinary fidelity [. . .] with which all the inferior agents in the story are represented' (the phrase 'inferior agents' suggesting their subordinacy in narrative as well as their socio-economic status). However, Jeffrey is also bent on persuading the reader that they can *feel*, subjectively, that this subset of Scott's characters are faithful representations without actually being familiar with the real originals that are represented:

> The way in which [manners and characters] are here represented must satisfy every reader, we think, by an inward tact and conviction, that the delineation has been made from actual experience and observation.[16]

'Inner tact' suggests a figurative application of *tact*'s original meaning in English – the sense of touch, via French from Latin *tangere*, 'to touch' – signifying a perceptive faculty that might be likened to the sense of touch. Scott's peculiar characters are tangible to the reader's mind because of 'the way in which they are here represented', independently of the sources that would verify their factual reality. The detailed texture of Scott's writing, his formal means of characterising – as Jeffrey puts it, his 'way' – creates the phenomena that satisfy the reader's 'tact' for what is real. In fact, there do exist 'records and vestiges of the more extraordinary parts of the representation', which will, Jeffrey notes, 'satisfy all who have the means of consulting them, as to the perfect accuracy of the picture' – but then, Jeffrey reaffirms his conviction that readers need no extra-textual verification to be impressed by Scott's characters' accuracy:

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 02:48:15, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.005

> No one who has not lived extensively among the lower orders of all descriptions, and made himself familiar with their various tempers and dialects, can perceive the full merit of those rapid and characteristic sketches; but it requires only a general knowledge of human nature to feel that they must be faithful copies from known originals.[17]

'Tactful' reading means the subjective experience of a virtual world with strong characters who seem real not because the reader knows their originals, but because the author's talents convince the reader that the characters are known to the author. In some cases, the reader takes satisfaction in imagining that their personal acquaintance might be the original of the fictional character – but believing that this is not actually the case.

Either way, the fictional character's accuracy is virtual. In response to realist character-writing like Scott's, fiction-readers develop a faculty of 'inner tact' such that characters' fidelity to the real can be cerebrally 'touched' and 'felt' without being known. The character-writer's talent for originality consists not in the invention of characters never seen before, but in the creation of characters that seem to have 'originals'. Romantic character talk does not use *original* to designate artistic originality in the sense of 'unconventional' or 'unprecedented'; typically, *original* is used only to mean the ideal 'real people' to which fictional characters might refer, as in 'the original of Mr. Bennet'. Nevertheless, by recognising the ideality of those originals, Romantic character talk acknowledges the author's power to originate characters through the formal realist 'way' they write, and supposes the existence of some faculty in readers that responds to it. While Romantic readers do not talk explicitly about character-writers being 'original', they do think that realist character-writers project a feeling about originality. 'Inward tact and conviction' about characters, not 'actual experience and observation', mediate for readers between realism and the real; or, to put it another way, this realism is a feeling about characters.

My analysis here falls in with a critical tradition of reading the *Spectator* and the *Tatler* as proto-novelistic, seeing Addison and Steele's characterisations as a large factor in the periodicals' success as distinctively entertaining reading material, and recognising the ways in which they deploy and develop Jean de la Bruyère's departures from the established conventions of the Theophrastan character. As Schön summarises, this criticism emphasises the differences between Theophrastan 'types' and novelistic 'individuals', arguing that the *Spectator* and its imitators provided 'examples in techniques which were later taken over as a valuable heritage by the newly emerging novel'.[18] I am interested in what the

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 02:48:15, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.005

Spectator's character-writing techniques seemingly do to replace an instructive taxonomy of moral character types with a bewildered field of characters 'not yet described' and 'not generally known',[19] seeming to trust (reasonably) that their readers would already possess knowledge of the themes and categories that had been used in the modern English 'character sketch' genre for around a hundred years, as well as being known from translations of Theophrastus and other examples from antiquity.[20]

I am also interested in how the *Spectator* arguably cultivates a desire for fictive 'reality' more generally – a realist conspiracy of setting, narrative, scenario and character – by experimenting with particularity, variety and haphazardness through the comic non-protagonist characters that comprise the Spectator's club throughout the periodical, as well as through the more briefly described (or auto-characterised) characters who appear only once in scenarios and 'letters to the editor'.

The rise of the English-language realist novel in eighteenth-century Britain has been associated with the idea that 'particularities' enhance literary works intended to divert readers because details and distinctiveness make the fiction's virtual reality more experiential and empirically credible. As Watt points out, the early British realists experimented with quotidian specificity in narrative and character decades before 'particularity' became established in critical discourse: 'For the critical tradition in the early eighteenth century was still governed by the strong classical preference for the general and universal: the proper object of literature remained *quod semper quod ubique ab omnibus creditum est*.'[21] Critics in the second half of the eighteenth century got hold of the first principle of British empiricism, that human knowledge derives from sense perception. In the discourse on the senses that introduces *Elements of Criticism* (1762), Lord Kames argues that the fine arts are part of a divine plan to decorporealise the human sensory experience of pleasure that offers mental diversion – as well as physical relief – from work:

> Our first perceptions are of external objects, and our first attachments are to them. Organic pleasures take the lead. But the mind, gradually ripening, relisheth more and more the pleasures of the eye and the ear; which approach the purely mental, without exhausting the spirits; and exceed the purely sensual, without danger of satiety. The pleasures of the eye and ear have accordingly a natural aptitude to attract us from the immoderate gratification of sensual appetite. For the mind, once accustomed to enjoy a variety of external objects [i.e. pleasure in the arts] without being conscious of the organic impression [as with pleasure in sex and eating], is prepared for enjoying internal objects where there cannot be an organic impression

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 02:48:15, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.005

> [i.e. pleasure in religious devotion]. Thus the author of nature, by qualifying the human mind for a succession of enjoyments from the lowest to the highest, leads it by gentle steps from the most groveling corporeal pleasures, for which solely it is fitted in the beginning of life, to those refined and sublime pleasures which are suited to its maturity.[22]

Kames's notion of pleasure in the arts as an intermediate step between the organic satisfaction of the body and the religious exaltation of the mind – both sensory and cerebral – anticipates Jeffrey's idea of an 'inner tact' that rewards character-reading. Since the perception involved in fiction-reading has graduated from the sensory perception of material objects, readers will be more satisfied by the particular than the abstract. As Kames puts it, 'abstract or general terms have no good effect in any composition for amusement; because it is only of particular objects that images can be formed'.[23] Whereas generalities present readers with intellectual exercise, particularities produce pseudo-sensory effects in the mind of the reader, allowing them to experience a virtual reality. Kames sees this human faculty as a gift from God, 'not governed by unavoidable necessity' but 'offer[ed . . .] to us, in order to advance our happiness'.[24]

(Kames recognises that it might usually be 'the opulent [members of society], who have leisure to improve their minds and their feelings' with the pseudo-sensory pleasures of the fine arts – unsurprisingly, given his moment in history. From my own viewpoint in a different historical moment, it is over a series of economic shifts and systems – industrial revolution, de-industrialisation, neoliberalism – that the realisms available from books, film and television have become increasingly important as sources of pseudo-sensory enjoyment or 'happiness' for many of us non-opulents. 'True crime', 'reality TV', 'costume drama': as suggested by their genre monikers, the postmodern realisms co-constructed for narrative forms by media, media journalism and social media are highly self-reflexive. They extensively use techniques that encourage listeners, viewers and readers to develop scepticism about the 'reality' of narrative entertainment in order to double their pleasure in realism: both the pseudo-sensory pleasure of immersion in a virtual reality, and the humour that arises from our perception of incongruities and artifices. This faculty destabilises realism to discover the 'real' dramas behind it: complex narratives of strategic collaboration and rivalry on a petty scale among workers in the hierarchies of the media industry – producers, directors, managers, writers, researchers, performers, technicians, caterers – and beyond that, a multinational epic of production and distribution companies, studios and state censors.)

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 02:48:15, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.005

In the Romantic period, the essential link between realism and pseudo-sensory experience was often expressed in discussions about non-protagonist characters – recall Coleridge's affection for Fielding's 'characters of postilions, landlords, landladies, waiters' where 'nothing can be more true, more happy or more humorous'[25] – though it has often been implicit or repressed in modern scholarship's accounts of the realist novel, as in Watt's observation that formal realism obliges itself 'to satisfy its reader with such details of the story as to the individuality of the actors concerned, the particulars of the times and places of their actions, details which are presented through a more largely referential use of language than is common in other literary forms' (32). Is formal realism's 'satisfaction' always a feeling? Realism satisfies the reader by convincing them of a virtual reality that provides them with pseudo-sensory impressions of objects understood to be like external 'referents' – or, in Romantic caricature talk, 'originals'.

The *Spectator* tends to assume a pleasure-driven taste not only for particularity, novelty and variety but also for the ways in which these elements ironically undermine the narrator's moral authority and the text's instructiveness. Addison explicitly acknowledges the reader's innate curiosity about 'Particulars' in the first number of the *Spectator*, where the titular character introduces himself. The kind of comic auto-characterising narration pioneered by Addison and Steele, innovating on Bruyère's first-person narration of character sketches, and exemplified in the Romantic novel by Scott's pseudo-epigraphic 'editors', adds to the reader's pleasure with an additional layer of realism:

> I have observed, that a Reader seldom peruses a Book with Pleasure'till he knows whether the Writer of it be a black or a fair Man, of a mild or cholerick Disposition, Married or a Batchelor, with other Particulars of the like nature, that conduce very much to the right Understanding of an Author. To gratify this Curiosity, which is so natural to a Reader, I design this Paper, and my next, as Prefatory Discourses to my following Writings, and shall give some Account in them of the several persons that are engaged in this Work (*S* no. 1, Addison).

After the Spectator's account of himself as an extravagantly, unaccountably silent and neutral gentleman who approaches life as a spectator sport, he claims to withhold deliberately the details that would make his identity known, openly playing to the reader's hunger for particulars: 'I keep my Complexion and Dress, as very great Secrets; tho' it is not impossible, but I may make Discoveries of both in the Progress of the Work I have undertaken'. The particulars that imply an original are not, in the

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 02:48:15, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.005

Spectator, adjuncts to the illustration of a vice or a failure of manners; rather, the Spectator's eccentricity is depicted as an innocuous, bountiful source of amusement. The reader is also expected to be amused by apparent contradictions in the Spectator's character – silent yet sociable, he must 'beg People's Pardon for an odd Humour I am guilty of, [. . .] which is saluting any Person whom I like, whether I know him or not' (no. 454, Steele). When it comes to the 'sketched' quasi-Theophrastan characters who appear only once in the *Spectator*, their particulars and peculiarities might be understood to serve the author's moral lessons by making the scenarios more engaging.

However, the *Spectator* continually undermines the moral import of its 'character sketches', first by treating the ill effects of characters' behaviour with hyperbole, second by calling the sketched character's supposed guilt into question, and third by emphasising the appeal of variety and novelty in the presentation of characters. In no. 194, for example, Steele prefaces two 'letters to the editor' with a moralising preface by the Spectator, who laments the 'ten thousand Tortures' experienced by individuals who perceive that their companions do not make enough effort to reciprocate their affections. The first letter, from a jealous husband, complains of a wife who does not make any pro-active effort to defend the innocence of her conduct – despite being convinced of her actual innocence:

> I have a Wife, of whose Virtue I am not in the least doubtful; yet I cannot be satisfied that she loves me, which gives me as great Uneasiness as being faulty the other Way would do. [. . .] If my Wife does the most ordinary thing, as visiting her Sister, or taking the Air with her Mother, it is always carried with the Air of a Secret: Then she will sometimes tell a thing of no Consequence, as if it was only Want of memory made her conceal it before; and this only to dally with my Anxiety.

The Spectator gives the wife the epithet of 'Corinna', a hyperbolic comparison with Ovid's *Amores* that calls into question the letter-writer's character as a faithful, innocent husband. The poet's persona in the *Amores* is a promiscuous character who suffers from sexual impotence and is having an affair with Corinna, a married woman, whom he coaches to flirt secretly with him while her husband is present. The *Amores*'s wounded lover, despicable and self-absorbed, is certainly no less fickle than the object of his affection. In one of the poems, he grabs Corinna by the hair, hits her and scratches her face; in another, he wishes that Corinna's husband would guard her more closely, since accessibility makes her less attractive to him; in another, he elegises Corinna's parrot, referencing Catullus's verses on a pet sparrow and implying his envy of the

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 02:48:15, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.005

beloved pet. By framing the husband's letter with a reference to Ovid's anxieties about Corinna, who has sex with other lovers and risks her life by terminating a pregnancy, Steele directs the reader to see the letter-writer as pathetically paranoid, eccentrically anxious about his wife merely leaving the house and not telling him immediately about everything.

No. 194's second letter is self-conscious of its novelty and variety, offering 'a Present of a Character not yet described in your Papers, which is that of a Man who treats his Friend with the same odd Variety which a Fantastical Female Tyrant practises towards her lover'. In the terminology of the 2000s, his friend is 'flaky': but that habit of 'ghosting' friends, while not consistent with the letter-writer's ideal of friendship, cannot be attributed to any conscious malice or selfishness. In fact, the letter-writer connects his friend's avoidant behaviour with his mood instability, which might be seasonal: transcribing 'some short Minutes I have taken of him in my Almanack since last Spring', the letter-writer points out that his friend's humour seems to be 'as various as the Weather'. It is hinted that the friend might be flaky because he trusts that the letter-writer will continue to love him despite his habit of avoiding his friends when it pleases his mood: 'The Rogue I know loves me, yet takes Advantage of my Fondness for him to use me as he pleases.' If the friend could be more considerate of the letter-writer, the letter-writer could also learn to take his friend's seasonality less personally. Again, the Spectator's hyperbolic description of its impact – 'the Source of utmost Unhappiness' – comically exaggerates the irritation of a letter-writer who is fortunate to enjoy, if only for part of the year, the company of 'the best Friend' and 'the sprightliest best-humoured Fellow in the World'. Addison and Steele's frequent use of the first-person 'letter to the editor', comically undermining the writer's reliability as a reporter of other characters, represents one of the *Spectator*'s biggest departures from the conventional didacticism of Theophrastan character-writing, and further comedises the 'character sketch' genre by shedding the authority of Bruyère's depersonalised I-narrator.

The *Spectator*'s haphazard accumulation of various characteristics and circumstances, dashed together and caught up in ironic comparisons, squashes the supposed 'moral' into a pretext, an occasion for diverting readers with characters. When a number of the *Spectator* begins with the moral, as in no. 194 with its 'ten thousand Tortures' and allusion to the *Amores*, it does not stabilise that moral into an authoritative pre-emption of the reader's perusal of the characters. Amid the irony of the Spectator's disapproval, and the varied particulars of the anecdotes, it becomes untenable that each character is 'an anthropomorphised social-moral theme,

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 02:48:15, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.005

such as thrift or loquaciousness' or embodies a single 'social, moral, or psychological category', as Schön and Smeed respectively describe the Theophrastan character.[26] In no. 194, various elements cast serious doubt on the characters' categorisation into a type such as 'the Mercurial Person', a phrase used by the second letter-writer to mean changeable or volatile, by association with the properties of 'quicksilver' (mercury). But in fact, both characters are predictable in their behaviour, since the wife is consistently unconcerned with her husband's anxiety to know everything she is doing and thinking, while the friend changes according to the seasons. With the second letter, Steele even makes a covert pun on the word 'mercurial': keeping an eye on 'the Glass' – which might be a barometer containing mercury – the letter-writer recognises that it might be British weather, not his friend, that is fickle. In addition to these methods of frustrating a reader's efforts to make typological categorisations, the structure of the characterisations in the *Spectator*, as in the *Caractères*, does not fall in with the Theophrastan convention of beginning with formulae such as 'A Fickle Woman is the sort of woman who'. For example, the *Spectator* does not tell us how to classify William Honeycomb (*S* no. 2, Steele), in contrast with the *London Magazine*'s 1764 Bruyère-esque portrait of 'Philander', who is 'what is called the ladies' man'.[27] The reader is not instructed but rather trusted to recognise Honeycomb as a 'beau' or 'gallant'. To conclude the sketch, rather than to begin it, the Spectator twists the Theophrastan formula into a polite phrase that conceals more than reveals character: 'I find there is not one of the Company but myself, who rarely speak at all, but speaks of him as that Sort of Man, who is usually called a well-bred fine Gentlemen [sic].'

More important than putting Honeycomb's singular behaviour in a social, moral, or psychological category, is emphasising his value to the club's variety. The 'gallant Will. Honeycomb' is included so 'that our Society may not appear a Set of Humourists unacquainted with the Gallantries and Pleasures of the Age', having a 'Way of Talking [that] very much enlivens the Conversation among us of a sedate Turn'. If anything, the reader is encouraged to include gallants in their society, as amusing companions and perhaps as a means of enjoying the forthright expression of thoughts that more scrupulously polite men would leave unsaid. To illustrate this point: in no. 4, Steele includes a one-sided 'dialogue' between Honeycomb and the Spectator at the opera, where the Spectator quietly ogles the women sitting near them, and Honeycomb responds aloud to his silent friend's 'great Approbation'. No. 454 finds the Spectator chasing a young woman (whom he considers a flirt) through the

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 02:48:15, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.005

streets, aided by their coachmen's hand signals, in a scene described with realist precision comparable to Defoe's in *Moll Flanders*. When the coachmen deliberately 'meet, jostle, and threaten each other for Way, [. . .] entangled at the End of Newport-Street and Long-Acre', the lady opens her window to look out, 'when she sees the Man she would avoid'. Switching in and out of the present tense, the Spectator describes how 'the Tackle of the Coach-Window is so bad she cannot draw it up again' – giving him the opportunity to watch her bumping along, 'the laced Shoe of her left Foot, with a careless Gesture, just appearing on the opposite Cushion, held her both firm, and in a proper Attitude to receive the next Jolt'. After this game of 'Blindman's Buff', the Spectator admires 'agreeable Females' with 'so many pretty Hands busie in the Foldings of Ribbands' and 'the utmost Eagerness of agreeable Faces in the sale of Patches, Pins, and Wires' – implicating him in Honeycomb's knowledge of fashionable clothing as well as his attention to women.

Thus, within a single number of the *Spectator*, a variety of characters (Honeycomb and the Spectator in no. 4; the wife, the husband and the friends in no. 194) can be played off against each other – not to make instructive contrasts between vice and virtue, between bad and good manners, but to immerse the reader in a virtual social reality where characters' various 'Particulars' prevent them from being assertively classified by a social-moral theme, as the Spectator's 'dashing' of characteristics and circumstances prevents them from being identified as portraits of real individuals. Addison and Steele's joint ownership of the Spectator and the other club members, and the periodical nature of the composition, should probably be considered as important circumstantial factors in the *Spectator*'s particular facility for 'dashing' characters with a variety of anecdotes and details. The result is a formal realism of strong characters defined by originality, particularity, variety and the seemingly haphazard entanglement of characteristics such that characters do not separately represent abstract categories.

Critical tradition has often subsumed the *Spectator*'s comic characterisations under the moral essay genre, seeing them as accessories to the conveyance of social, moral and psychological knowledge. Focusing on the *Spectator*'s precedents for Romantic caricature talk, I have argued that the periodical's character-writing techniques depart from the conventions of moral characterology, showing how it emphasises diverting characters over instructive ones, assuming that the reader already possesses the knowledge of morals and manners that is required to appreciate Addison's and Steele's irony. The 'character sketch' genre had thrived in

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 02:48:15, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.005

British literary culture throughout the seventeenth century, with sketches 'found gathered together in collections (a volume containing anything from eight to eighty [characters]), singly in pamphlet form, or scattered in the periodicals';[28] and interest in the genre was then revitalised by English translations of Jean de la Bruyère's controversial *Caractères* (1688). With each new edition of *Caractères*, readers had added to their manuscript 'keys' listing the real people that *Caractères* supposedly portrayed as quasi-Theophrastan characters – and Bruyères objected. Addison and Steele, and the British comic novelists after them, also insisted on the possibility of 'original' characters, who were carefully constructed to seem as particular as real people without having individual referents. Unseating at every turn its narrator's claim to write morally purposeful satire that aims to correct the reader and society at large, the *Spectator* offers readers a humorously ambiguous diversion where 'Morality' is always falling down on 'Wit'.

Critics and editors have tried to distinguish the *Spectator*'s wit from its wisdom, diagramming the former as a container for the latter, even to the extent of literally separating the two in an attempt to frame the *Spectator* as a set of instructive moral essays. In the late 1820s, the Rev. E. Berens split his selected edition of the *Spectator* over two volumes, one containing moral wisdom suited to the ignorant, the other containing wit intended for those already wise and well mannered. The first of these volumes, 'made with a view to readers of every description, and every rank in life' and omitting the Greek and Latin mottos, was honoured with a place on 'the Supplemental Catalogue of the Society of Promoting Christian Knowledge for the use of Parochial Libraries'. It is Berens's *Second Selection* (1828), a volume 'of a less serious character' and 'intended for readers whose literary education has been more advanced, and who have more leisure for light reading',[29] which includes the twelve numbers featuring anecdotes about the *Spectator*'s most popular character, 'Sir Roger de Coverley'. Although aspects of Addison's and Steele's writing could be read unironically and classified as 'moral essays', the complete *Spectator* could not be shoehorned into that category: its characters especially made it prone to classification as 'light reading'.

The *Spectator* and the *Tatler* emerged as precursors to the tradition of the novel luxuriant with comic characters – Fielding, Smollett, Burney, Edgeworth, Austen, Scott, Dickens – and its strong characters, particularly Sir Roger, as enduring symbols of the 'originality' required for divertingly realist characterisation.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 02:48:15, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.005

Loving Sir Roger de Coverley

One of the first comic non-protagonist characters in English-language literature to be taken seriously by character criticism, 'Sir Roger de Coverley' was a node around which Romantic caricature talk took shape. As well as appearing in professional writing about literature, Sir Roger is a subject of readers' character talk when he is casually summoned as a virtual human presence readily recollected in humorous scenarios. A good example is Robert Burns's reference to Sir Roger's deathbed scene in a letter to the Edinburgh bookseller Peter Hill, where he uses Sir Roger for a comic reflection on his own whimsical behaviour: '[A]s Sir Roger de Coverley, because it happened to be a cold day in which he made his will, ordered his servants great-coats for mourning, so, because I have been this week plagued with an indigestion, I have sent you by the carrier a fine old ewe-milk cheese.'[30] This casual reference to a particular number of the *Spectator* suggests, I think, that Sir Roger could have featured, briefly and frequently, in oral conversations throughout the eighteenth century, for as long as speakers could assume that their interlocutors would have read the *Spectator* or at least a selection of Sir Roger's appearances. A passing reference to Sir Roger, a famously sociable and benevolent character, could powerfully signify friendship, generosity and pathos as well as providing humour.

Here I focus on how appreciations of Sir Roger practised the terms of Romantic caricature talk about strong characters in the professional literary criticism of the late eighteenth century and the Romantic period. I analyse a selection of passages about Sir Roger from essays on Steele and Addison, published between the late 1770s and the early 1820s, when perhaps professional readers' interest in formal arguments about the character is waning: excerpts from Samuel Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* (1779), James Beattie's *Papers of Joseph Addison* (1790), Nathan Drake's *Essays Biographical, Critical and Historical* (1805), Alexander Chalmers's *The British Essayists* (1808) and Lionel Thomas Berguer's *British Essayists* (1823).[31] In these passages – as well as the ideals for comic non-protagonists discussed in the first part of this chapter (diversion, originality, realism) – there are several elements distinctive of Romantic-period caricature talk. First, the critics explicitly link the character's 'originality' to the combinational power of the creative mind; and second, critics use the anti-caricature vocabulary also discussed in Chapters 2 and 4 of this book. Third, caricature talk about Sir Roger, like the critical genre of the

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 02:48:15, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.005

character appreciation, takes up certain stylistic and rhetorical devices, such as the use of first-person plural pronouns and superlative constructions. Fourth, 'Sir Roger' evokes the idea of literary favouritism and of writers, as well as readers, loving fictitious characters in parasocial and/or proprietary ways.

Whereas in early eighteenth-century literature the link between the comic character's constructed 'originality' and the character-writer's imaginative 'originality' is only implied, Romantic caricature talk about strong and favourite characters praises Addison and Steele for a creative mental faculty that seems to originate the very characters that strike the reader with extra-textual 'originality'. In Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*, for example, Addison 'copies life with so much fidelity, that he can be hardly said to invent; yet his exhibitions have an air so much original, that it is difficult to suppose them not merely the product of imagination'.[32] (Here, Johnson uses the word 'merely' not as a pejorative, but in the sense of 'purely' or 'entirely'.)

Other critics followed Johnson in crediting Steele, as well as Addison, with the ability to 'originate' characters: the eight-volume edition of *The Spectator* printed in 1788 for Payne, Rivington, Davis, Longman, Dodsley et al. agrees that 'it seems most probable that the character of Sir Roger de Coverley originated in Stelee's [sic] fertile imagination, as that of Bickerstaff likewise did'.[33] After criticism misattributed no. 2 of the *Spectator* to Addison, there remained controversy over whether Addison or Steele was most responsible for Sir Roger, and critics differed on whether Steele should be given more credit for his 'outline' than Addison for his 'extension' and 'improvement' of the character, in Chalmers's words.[34] Summarising the decades of debate about Addison's and Steele's different contributions to Sir Roger, Berguer's commentary comes down on the side of inventiveness and of Steele's 'original draft':

> For the first outline, or skeleton of this character, we are indebted certainly to Steele; but Addison, after availing himself of this elementary suggestion, departs materially from the original draft, as he brings out his picture into relief. This has occasioned many critics to charge the character with inconsistency; and without question the Sir Roger de Coverley of Steele is a very altered personage in the hands of Addison. Let it, however, be always remembered, that we are *primarily* indebted to Steele for Sir Roger de Coverley, *even as we have him*: Addison finished, but Steele *invented* him.[35]

Nathan Drake, too, credits Steele with the invention of Sir Roger, using the phrase 'original character' in the sense of a character that gives an impression of authorial originality, and which requires serious effort from

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 02:48:15, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.005

collaborators to 'enter [. . .] with perfect accuracy into the conception and keeping of a character so original as that of Sir Roger de Coverley'.[36]

For Drake, Steele's originality in character-writing creates a strong impression of 'creative energy' seemingly at odds with the convincing naturalness of characters' features and manners. Steele's comic characters in the *Spectator*, the *Tatler* and the *Guardian* are 'original' yet typical, natural yet still 'original':

> Of the oriental tale, apologue, or fable, [. . .] I much wish that Sir Richard had afforded us more numerous examples. [. . .] If in the effusions of pure imagination Sir Richard seldom indulged, he has amply compensated for the omission by the invention and originality he has exhibited in the conception and conduct of many of the various characters which enliven his productions. [. . . His characters] are drawn and finished in a manner which not only indicates a perfect insight into the passions and feelings of the human frame, but demonstrates likewise the possession of that creative energy which, from the numerous shades and gradations of manner, can select and associate such features as shall designate a character altogether original, though founded on the usual acknowledged motives and actions of mankind; the resemblance, in fact, is true to the species, though not to any peculiar individual. This faculty of forming natural, consistent, yet *original* character, so essential to the dramatic writer whether in poetry or prose, so rarely attainable, and so valuable when attained, Steele most assuredly possessed in a very considerable degree.[37]

Original character-writing, Drake supposes, is a process of combining and selecting from the writer's knowledge of human life, both interior and social. Like other critics, Drake contradicts the rumour that the *Spectator*'s club members were actually based on real 'originals': 'It has been supposed, though upon no firm foundation, that the personages here enumerated were intended as copies of existing characters; that Sir Roger was drawn for Sir John Packington of Worcestershire, a Tory not deficient in good sense, but abounding in whimsical peculiarities. [. . .] These are, however, mere conjectures, and therefore claim but little credit.'[38] Authorial originality *combines* existing materials with such novelty – contrast, irony, complexity – that the reader receives an impression of 'creative energy' capable of actually 'originating' something, rather than only copying it.

In praising both Sir Roger's 'originality' and the authorial originality of his creators, Romantic character talk fends off potential arguments that Addison's and Steele's comic characters might be unnatural or exaggerated, using the vocabulary of the anti-caricature rhetoric discussed in Chapter 2. Critics emphasise the 'delicacy', 'fidelity' and 'modesty' of Addison's character-writing – concepts that become feminised in the critical

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 02:48:15, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.005

reception of Austen's characters, as I explore in Chapter 4. Johnson writes that Addison 'formed a very delicate and discriminated idea' of Sir Roger, and that he 'never outsteps the modesty of nature'; his characters 'neither divert by distortion, or amaze by aggravation'.[39] Berguer calls Sir Roger 'one of the most exquisite pieces of comic painting which English literature possesses'.[40] Beattie observes that the characterisation stops short of being 'humorous in that degree of extravagance, which Addison always avoided', and contrasts the subtle characterisation of 'Sir Roger' with the exaggerations of caricature drawing and comic theatrics:

> Many writers seem to think that humour consists in violent and preternatural exaggeration; as there are no doubt many frequenters of the theatre, who find no want of comic powers in the actor who has a sufficient variety of wry faces and antic gestures; and many admirers of farce and fun, with whom bombast and big words would pass for exquisite ridicule. But wry faces are made with little effort, caricatura may be sketched by a very unskilful [sic] hand, and he who has no command of natural expression may easily put together gigantic figures and rumbling syllables.[41]

While exaggerated 'caricatures' can make an immediate impact by playing to popular taste, they can never be lovable: only 'naturally' comic characters can inspire lasting affection, never behaving so peculiarly that the reader cannot imagine disliking their company, were they real people. 'Sir Roger has peculiarities; that was necessary to make him a comic character; but', Beattie argues, 'they are all amiable, and tend to good: and there is not one of them that would give offence, or raise contempt or concern; in any rational society. At Sir Roger we never laugh, though we generally smile; but it is a smile, always of affection, and frequently of esteem'.[42]

In this strain of anti-caricature rhetoric, avoiding caricature makes strong characters good company. Austen asks that her readers be able to enjoy, as her protagonists do, the society of peculiar yet essentially 'good' characters: Elizabeth and Mr Bennet are quietly and tolerantly amused by Mr Collins for several hours, and Emma's friends are shocked when she mocks Miss Bates to her face. Caricature talk thus imagines the reader developing parasociality with comic non-protagonist characters, a relationship comprising attentiveness, patience and affection.

While Romantic caricature talk about the *Spectator*, dominated by anti-caricature rhetoric, is distinct from the critical genre of the character appreciation as described by Lynch – 'excessive with respect to its subject matter', with an 'over-the-top effect and purple prose'[43] – there are some points of similarity with 'character appreciation' in caricature talk's rhetoric and style. Anti-caricature rhetoric uses superlative constructions to praise

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 02:48:15, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.005

character and writer: Johnson writes that '[a]s a describer of life and manners, [Addison] must be allowed to stand perhaps the first of the first rank'; and Beattie thinks that 'No man on earth affects grandeur less, or thinks less of it, than Sir Roger; and no man is less solitary.'[44] Critics pretend that their opinions are controversial, using constructions like 'I beg leave to observe', 'I cannot admit' and 'I will not admit' – while also chummily assuming that other readers naturally share the critic's appreciation: 'At Sir Roger we never laugh, [. . .] we generally smile; but it is a smile,—always of affection, and frequently of esteem.'[45]

Like the character appreciation genre, caricature talk generally bases its comments on the critic's holistic remembrance of the character. The critic feels no obligation to provide evidence for specific claims with correspondingly specific textual analysis: the reader seems expected to compare the critic's claims about 'Sir Roger' not with the actual text of the *Spectator*, but with the version of Sir Roger that the reader carries around in their head. Like character appreciation, Romantic caricature talk defends or minimises the strong character's peculiarities as though their mind and ethics exist separately of the text. Johnson and Beattie, for example, feel the need to argue that Sir Roger is sound of mind. Johnson gives the opinion that Sir Roger's 'irregularities [. . .] in conduct seem not so much the effects of a mind deviating from the beaten track of life, by the perpetual pressure of some overwhelming idea, as of habitual rusticity, and that negligence which solitary grandeur naturally generates'.[46] Beattie disagrees that 'there is in this character any thing of *rusticity* (as that word is generally understood) or any of those habits or ways of thinking that solitary grandeur creates'; but he agrees with Johnson that 'it never was, or could be, the Author's purpose to represent Sir Roger as a person of disordered understanding'.[47]

However, this faith in authorial intentionality and in the author's intellectual ownership of the non-protagonist character makes a significant difference between caricature talk and the character appreciation – which, Lynch observes, continually raises the possibility that characters exceed, or somehow pre-exist, their authors' conscious control. Maurice Morgann, for example, wants to 'examine if there be not something more in the character than is shewn; something inferred'; Thomas Robertson suggests that 'Shakespeare had no particular plan laid out in his mind for Hamlet to walk by' and 'rather meant to *follow* [Hamlet]; and like an historian, with fidelity to record how a person so singularly and marvellously made up should act'.[48] In contrast, despite similar concerns with characters' 'fidelity' and 'singularity', caricature talk's anti-caricature rhetoric insists on the

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 02:48:15, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.005

writer's complete control over the character, often in categorical terms: character-writers 'never' do something, and 'always' do another.

Comic characters rarely stand alone in caricature talk, even when they are identified as 'favourites'. The most fundamental difference between caricature talk and the character appreciation is the fact that appreciations focus on a single character and are relatively extended, often taking up whole essays or chapters with the character's name in the title, whereas caricature talk typically occurs in the midst of an essay on a more general topic, discussing the author and multiple works by them. Then, when fictive characters are discussed, critics usually bring multiple characters and writers into the frame, grouping them, comparing and ranking them. Berguer's remarks, in 1823, on the longevity of Sir Roger – a comic character who 'has continued without a rival for upwards of one hundred years [. . . and] can bear *even now* to rank unflinchingly with those masterly delineations of life and manners, which, since Shakspeare, only the Author of Waverley has been able to achieve' – exemplify the way in which Romantic caricature talk, sometimes using anti-caricature rhetoric, puts strong non-protagonist characters into competition with each other, testing their strength.[49]

This rhetorical formula is used to its fullest extent in the introduction to an 1894 edition of *Pride and Prejudice*, where George Saintsbury ranks *Pride and Prejudice*'s characters above those of Austen's other novels, and raises Austen as a comic writer even above Addison:

> I for one should put *Pride and Prejudice* far lower if it did not contain what seem to me the very masterpieces of Miss Austen's humour and of her faculty of character-creation—masterpieces who may indeed admit John Thorpe, the Eltons, Mrs. Norris, and one or two others to their company, but who, in one instance certainly, and perhaps in others are still superior to them.
>
> The characteristics of Miss Austen's humour are so subtle and delicate [. . .] To me this humour seems to possess a greater affinity, on the whole, to that of Addison than to any other of the humorous species of this greater British genus [. . .T]he likeness of quality consists in a great number of subdivisions of quality—demureness, extreme minuteness of touch, avoidance of loud tones and glaring effects.[50]

But despite Addison's reputation, Saintsbury argues, Mr Collins – 'the immortal, the ineffable Mr. Collins' – is 'really *great*; far greater than anything Addison ever did'.[51] As Addison's and Steele's work on the club members and character sketches of the *Spectator* became a benchmark for the critical reception of comic non-protagonist characters throughout the

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 02:48:15, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.005

Romantic period and the nineteenth century, it was admitted that some writers might be able to exceed Addison's comic talent while writing more up-to-date characters. According to Saintsbury, though he 'has been charged with exaggeration', though 'there is something gigantic' about him, Mr Collins 'is perfectly natural, and perfectly alive', and in Austen's realist characters, '[n]othing is false; nothing is superfluous': late nineteenth-century anti-caricature rhetoric uses the same absolutes to praise Austen that late eighteenth-century caricature talk uses to praise Addison.[52]

These last pages of Chapter 3 investigate Romantic-period critics' expressions of love and possessiveness about 'Sir Roger' and 'Mr Collins'. The critical receptions of these two characters illustrate how, in Romantic caricature talk, the comic non-protagonist characters most vulnerable to being 'charged with exaggeration' are capable of eliciting – by means of superior realism – a pseudo-sensory pleasure interpreted as 'love' and involving simulated feelings of anxiety, loss and relief. James Beattie exemplifies Romantic caricature talk's declared feelings about the *Spectator*'s most popular character when he writes of 'lov[ing] with that fondness with which every heart is attached to Sir Roger'.[53]

The most prominent trope in late eighteenth–century character talk about *The Spectator* is an anecdote that establishes Sir Roger's lovability and his status as a favourite. Every critic and editor refers to Eustace Budgell's claim, in the first number of *The Bee*, that Addison wanted to kill off Sir Roger before anyone else got the chance – identifying Sir Roger not only as Addison's 'favourite' but as everyone's favourite, and thus vulnerable to becoming an unauthorised literary franchise. The debate over whether Addison or Steele was most responsible for 'Sir Roger' also highlights the possibility of feeling possessive and protective of a fictive character, with Chalmers suggesting that Addison, 'charmed with his colleague's outline of Sir Roger, [. . .] might probably determine to make it in some measure his own, by guarding with a father's fondness, against any violation that might be offered'.[54] Johnson imagines Addison's fatherly fondness of Sir Roger, referring both to 'the killing of Sir Roger' and to Addison's displeasure with Steele's episode of Sir Roger and the prostitute, which Addison did not know of until it was published:

> It is recorded by Budgell, that of the characters feigned or exhibited in the *Spectator*, the favourite of Addison was Sir Roger de Coverley, of whom he had formed a very delicate and discriminated idea, which he would not suffer to be violated; and therefore when Steele had shown him innocently picking up a girl in the Temple and taking her to a tavern, he drew upon himself so much of his friend's indignation, that he was forced to appease

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 02:48:15, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.005

> him by a promise of forbearing Sir Roger for the time to come. The reason which induced Cervantes to bring his hero to the grave, *para mi solo nacio Don Quixote, y yo para el*, made Addison declare, with an undue vehemence of expression, that he would kill Sir Roger; being of opinion that they were born for one another, and that any other hand would do him wrong.[55]

The love of an author for his character is a relationship between gentlemen, as Johnson sees it: Addison 'kills' Sir Roger – ensuring authorial control of the circumstances and manner of the character's death – not merely to do honour to a textual character but as though to preserve the honour of an extra-textual character. Johnson's version of the 'killing Sir Roger' anecdote imagines that the focus of Addison's love is not the text characterising 'Sir Roger' but 'a very delicate and discriminate idea' of Sir Roger residing in his mind. Because for Addison any textual addition or sequel that seems to modify the character, or show it in a different light, is not an extension of the character but a 'violation' of it, Sir Roger acquires a quality of extra-textuality.

Critics differ on how proprietorial Addison's love of Sir Roger was, with Chalmers claiming that 'he neither immediately laid hold on what he considered as Steele's property, nor did he wish to monopolize the worthy Knight'.[56] However, the anecdote about Addison killing Sir Roger out of love consistently recurs in the introductions and footnotes to successive editions of the *Spectator*: readers experiencing Sir Roger's death for the first time would typically have encountered it with footnotes referring to Budgell's anecdote in the *Bee*. For example, in Payne's 1788 edition of the *Spectator*, the page looks like this ('departed' is the catchword):

> We last night received a piece of ill news at our club, which very sensibly afflicted every one of us. I question not but my readers themselves will be troubled at the hearing of it. To keep them no longer in suspence, Sir ROGER DE COVERLEY *is dead*.* He
>
> departed
>
> * 'Mr. Addison was so fond of this character, that a little before he laid down The Spectator, (foreseeing that some nimble gentleman would catch up his pen the moment he quitted it) he said to an intimate friend, with a certain *warmth* in his expression, which he was not often guilty of, *By G—, I'll kill Sir Roger, that nobody else may murder him*. Accordingly the whole *Spectator*, N° 517, consists of nothing else but an account of the old knight's death, and some moving circumstances which attended it.'[57]

This anecdote, reiterated in edition after edition, and cited in numerous critical essays on Addison and Steele, would have impressed generations of *Spectator*-readers with the notion of Sir Roger as an 'idea' separate from the

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 02:48:15, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.005

text, animated by an authorial love that demands the primacy of authorial intention.

From the second half of the nineteenth century onwards, and after the *Spectator* as a whole ceased to be regularly recommended reading, Sir Roger's continued recognition as a favourite character was reinforced by selected editions of 'the Sir Roger de Coverley papers'. Thus, the *Spectator* endured as a model of comic characterisation. The first *Sir Roger De Coverley Papers* appeared in 1850, and successive editions of *The Sir Roger de Coverley Papers from "The Spectator"* came out in the 1890s, in Britain and the United States – often alongside other 'classics', such as in *Longmans' English Classics*, the American Book Company's *Eclectic English Classics* and *Riverside Literature Series*. In Britain, Joseph Meek's edition of *The De Coverley Papers from The Spectator* (London: J. M. Dent, 1920), part of *The Kings Treasuries of Literature* series, went through several printings.

Meek's introduction suggests an unbroken critical tradition of caricature talk and anti-caricature rhetoric about Sir Roger – though it adopts an idiom that deploys more similes than the 'sentimental' caricature talk of the Romantic period (and which is perhaps, depending on your taste, a more affectedly sentimental or 'twee' mode of criticism). Meek of course makes references to Scott and Dickens, as well as Shakespeare: 'There is no original for Sir Roger or Falstaff or Mr. Micawber.' The tropes, rhetoric and stylistic devices of anti-caricature rhetoric in Romantic caricature talk about Sir Roger are all present in Meek's introduction. The first-person pronouns, superlatives, ranking of comic characters, comparisons with Shakespeare and other literary touchstones, emphasis on authorial originality, on the author's possessiveness and the reader's love, are all trotted out as dependable clichés of popular literary criticism:

> No character in our literature, not even Mr. Pickwick, has more endeared himself to successive generations of readers than Addison's Sir Roger de Coverley: there are many figures in drama and fiction of whom we feel that they are in a way personal friends of our own, that once introduced to us they remain a permanent part of our little world. It is the abiding glory of Dickens, it is one of Shakespeare's abiding glories, to have created many such [. . .]. We are brought into the society of a fine old-fashioned country gentleman [. . .] with just those touches of whimsicality and those lovable faults which go straight to our hearts. [. . .]
>
> 'Addison's' Sir Roger we have called him, and be sure that honest Dick Steele, even if he drew the first outlines of the figure, would not bear us a grudge for so doing. Whoever first thought of Sir Roger, and however many little touches may have been added by other hands, he remains Addison's creation: and furthermore it does not matter a snap of the fingers

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 02:48:15, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.005

> whether any actual person served as the model from which the picture was taken. Of all the bootless quests that literary criticism can undertake, this search for 'the original' is the least valuable. The artist's mind is a crucible which transmutes and re-creates.'[58]

The belief that Sir Roger belongs to Addison, his supposed creator, not only frames the 1920 *Papers* but actually alters the reader's encounter with Sir Roger. Meek opts not to include Steele's episode of Sir Roger inviting a prostitute to the countryside, 'which is wholly out of keeping with Sir Roger's character'.[59] Meek does not reveal what happens in the omitted episode and does not inform the reader about which number of the *Spectator* is concerned. Thus, Meek's most significant editorial decision is driven by Romantic caricature talk's concept of Sir Roger being Addison's, both as an intellectual property and as an object of love. Favouritism gives editors like Meek a special sense of duty. In Meek's interpretation of this duty, the selected Sir Roger is more authentic than the complete 'Sir Roger' – resulting in an edition that is textually incomplete but which honours Addison's supposed feelings about Sir Roger as an extra-textual personage.

Scholarship on the novel, when it considers the fictitious characters most prone to being seen as 'caricatures', has often defined their 'minorness' or 'subordination' in terms of narrative or plot. Caricature talk, however, as it evokes favouritism for strong non-protagonist characters, is well-placed to argue for their importance to the narrative form of the realist novel, where plots might emerge 'naturally' out of collisions between diverse characters in a social space. In the last pages of this chapter, I argue that Romantic caricature talk was able to think that comic and eccentric non-protagonist characters were inceptive to realist novels because it reckoned the intellect and creative energy that authors seemed to have disproportionately invested in such 'favourites'. From a 1904 edition of the *Sir Roger De Coverley Papers*, via Watt's observations about character and narrative in *Tom Jones* in 1957, I wend to Coleridge's commentary on Mercutio as one of 'Shakspere's favourite characters'. Coleridge's analysis of the narrative importance of favouritism represents with great intellectual clarity a facet of Romantic caricature talk's faith that readers forge especially 'real', parasocial connections with certain characters, the ones who might possibly be considered 'caricatures' – and that fondness for strong characters has a crucial role in readers feeling themselves convinced by literary constructions of reality.

As I have discussed, highly particularised non-protagonist characters were more readily conceptualised as extra-textual entities who exist prior

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 02:48:15, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.005

to narrative; and this was reinforced by the literal extraction of Sir Roger from his textual context in publications like *The Sir Roger De Coverley Papers* and indexes in selections from Addison's and Steele's writings.[60] In one such edition, C. T. Winchester argues using anti-caricature rhetoric that since strong characters like Sir Roger have 'living' presence that pre-exists narrative, they are crucial to the process of realist plot-writing:

> The Sir Roger de Coverley papers are often said to be the precursor of the modern English novel. And in a very real sense they are. There are, to be sure, crude specimens of prose fiction in the preceding century. [. . .] But these romances, while they supply the element of plot and adventure most liberally, were deficient in genuine characters. There are no real men and women in them. Moreover, they made no attempt to depict contemporary life as it was. But Sir Roger de Coverley is no personage of romance. He is a hearty, red-blooded, Tory gentleman who lives in Worcestershire. And he has no adventures more striking than might naturally befall a country squire who comes up to London for the season once a year. There were scores of just such men in every shire in England. His speech, his habits, his prejudices, are all shown us with simple truth. And yet this is done with so much art and humour that Sir Roger is one of the most living persons in our literature. He is as immortal as Hamlet or Julius Caesar. We know him as well as we know our nearest neighbour; and we like him quite as well as we like most of our neighbours.
>
> Now this was something new in English literature. Sir Roger is the earliest person in English imaginative prose that is really still alive. There are men and women in our poetry before his day – in the drama there is, of course, a great host of them; but in prose literature Sir Roger is the first. Furthermore, the men and women of the drama, even in that comedy of manners which professed to reflect most accurately contemporary society, were almost always drawn with some romantic or satiric exaggeration; but there is no exaggeration in the character of Sir Roger. Here was the beginning of a healthy realism. It was only necessary for Richardson and Fielding, thirty years later, to bring together several such characters into a group, and to show how the incidents of their lives naturally ran into plot or story – and we have a novel.[61]

There are language and ideas here that are familiar from early nineteenth-century caricature talk such as in the critical reception of Austen's characters, which I discuss in Chapter 4.

Winchester's explicit subordination of narrative to character is less typical of caricature talk, however, and interests me by the way it contradicts Watt's argument in *The Rise of the Novel* that 'minor characters' are generally incidental to the plots of realist novels. Strong characters are free to provide humour and sociological interest because they have little to do with the central narrative:

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 02:48:15, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.005

> *Tom Jones* [. . .] would seem to exemplify a principle of considerable significance for the novel form in general: namely, that the importance of the plot is in inverse proportion to that of character. [. . . T]he organisation of the narrative into an extended and complex structure will tend to turn the protagonists into its passive agents, but will offer compensatingly greater opportunities for the introduction of a variety of minor characters, whose treatment will not be hampered in the same way by the roles which they are allotted by the complications of the narrative design. The principle and its corollary would seem to lie behind Coleridge's contrast of the 'forced and unnatural quality' of the scenes between the protagonists in *Tom Jones* and Fielding's treatment of the 'characters of postilions, landlords, landladies, waiters' where 'nothing can be more true, more happy or more humorous'. These minor characters figure only in scenes which require exactly the amount of psychological individuality which they are possessed of; relieved of any responsibility for carrying out the major narrative design, Mrs. Honour can get herself dismissed from the Western household by methods which are at once triumphantly comic, sociologically perceptive and eminently characteristic.[62]

In Watt's schema of plot and character, every plot device, and every new setting or social interaction involved in the progression of the plot, is an opportunity for the writer to introduce a new 'minor character', or to tell an anecdote about an already established one; and the non-protagonist character's power to divert is bound up with its status as a digression. Romantic character talk, however, has a long-standing alternative perspective on the eighteenth-century British novel's supposed innovations in plot-construction: Winchester's caricature talk about 'Sir Roger' in 1904 resonates with Coleridge's remarks about 'Mercutio', his seventh lecture on Shakespeare, in linking the amiability of the non-protagonist character to the impact of narrative realism.

Coleridge's commentary on the strong characters in *Romeo and Juliet* somewhat resembles the 'character appreciation' genre, in that he is ready to appreciate character eccentricities in terms of the complexity of the human mind. He celebrates characteristic comic dialogue for its 'truth' in distinctly representing different operations of the human mental faculty. Coleridge also acknowledges that peculiar or 'irregular' characters can serve to make plots more plausible and emotionally interesting (Mercutio, and the narrative consequences of Romeo's friendship with him), as well as indirectly characterising protagonists (the nurse, and her contrast with Juliet). The plot's structure may not require the non-protagonists' interesting peculiarities, but the plot's significance and realism can rely on them. Coleridge points out that the plot of *Romeo and Juliet*, in the

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 02:48:15, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.005

inciting action of Tybalt's killing, depends not just on Mercutio's death, but on his character. Peculiarity of character renders Mercutio's death interesting, important and a plausible cause of Romeo's switch from self-absorbed lover to vengeful friend:

> Shakspere's favourite characters are full of such lively intellect. Mercutio is a man possessing all the elements of a poet: the whole word was, as it were, subject to his law of association. Whenever he wishes to impress anything, all things become his servants for the purpose: all things tell the same tale, and sound in unison. This faculty, moreover, is combined with the manners and feelings of a perfect gentleman, himself utterly unconscious of his powers. By his loss it was contrived that the whole catastrophe of the tragedy should be brought about: it endears him to Romeo, and gives to the death of Mercutio an importance which it could not otherwise have acquired.
>
> I say this in answer to an observation, I think by Dryden (to which indeed Dr. Johnson has fully replied), that Shakspere having carried the part of Mercutio as far as he could, till his genius was exhausted, had killed him in the third Act, to get him out of the way. What shallow nonsense! As I have remarked, upon the death of Mercutio the whole catastrophe depends; it is produced by it. The scene in which it occurs serves to show how indifference to any subject but one, and aversion to activity on the part of Romeo, may be overcome and roused to the most resolute and determined conduct. Had not Mercutio been rendered so amiable and so interesting, we could not have felt so strongly the necessity for Romeo's interference, connecting it immediately, and passionately, with the future fortunes of the lover and his mistress.[63]

Put another way, 'we' understand that Romeo kills Tybalt because Mercutio is Romeo's particular favourite, and we find the action convincing because Mercutio is our favourite too. Romantic character criticism insists that fictive characters can be the objects of our love, and occasion our sense of loss when they fictitiously die. While Coleridge does not address how favouritism for Mercutio might interact with emotional responses to the lovers' deaths at the close of the narrative, it is implicit in his commentary that the more one cares about Mercutio, the more one will be convinced of the tragic necessity of the play's final events, which represent Romeo and Juliet's failure to overcome the separation imposed by Romeo's revenge for Mercutio. One's emotional response to the lovers' deaths might be intensified and complicated by the textual and diegetic 'precedence' of the stronger 'favourite' character.

For readers familiar with the caricature talk that mediated the *Spectator* in the Romantic period, the death of Sir Roger was famously affecting.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 02:48:15, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.005

While the character's appearances in the *Spectator* did not form a novelistic plot, 'killing' Sir Roger offered something like a sense of narrative closure. The character's death acted as emotional punctuation, inviting readers to reflect on the pleasure they had taken in Sir Roger, to contemplate his finitude and experience a semblance of loss; asking readers to feel satisfied by a 'natural ending' to Addison and Steele's papers, and to feel the twinge of one emotion accompanying another, when amusement at Edward Biscuit's letter and Sir Roger's marginalia is swiftly displaced by grief:

> This Letter, notwithstanding the poor Butler's Manner of writing it, gave us such an Idea of our good old Friend, that upon the reading of it there was not a dry Eye in the Club. Sir Andrew opening the Book, found it to be a Collection of Acts of Parliament. There was in particular the Act of Uniformity, with some Passages in it marked by Sir Roger's own Hand. Sir Andrew found that they related to two or three points, which he had disputed with Sir Roger the last time he appeared at the Club. Sir Andrew, who would have been merry at such an Incident on another Occasion, at the sight of the old Man's Hand-writing burst into Tears, and put the Book into his Pocket (no. 517, Addison).

In *The British Essayists*, Chalmers claims that 'it is universally agreed that [the killing of Sir Roger] produced a paper of transcendant [sic] excellence in all the graces of simplicity and pathos. There is not in our language any assumption of character more faithful than that of the honest butler, nor a more irresistible stroke of nature than the circumstance of the book received by Sir Andrew Freeport'.[64] Readers committed no. 517 to memory, able to recall details of incident: Sir Roger writing his will on a cold day and leaving warm clothing to everyone in the parish, Sir Andrew Freeport putting the book in his pocket. The description of Sir Andrew weeping openly over Sir Roger's handwriting in the *Acts of Parliament* prompts the *Spectator*'s readers to recognise their own emotional sensitivity to such mundane and characteristic textual details in a context of mortality and loss. Finalising its characterisation of Sir Roger with his fictitious death, rather than with a more arbitrary textual truncation, the *Spectator* invites readers to discern the full extent of their love for Sir Roger, now that he exists both as 'such an Idea of our good old Friend' – particularised, static, immortal – and as a real departed presence, here and gone. By reading, re-reading and remembering Sir Roger's life and death in the *Spectator*, the Romantic character-reader experiences a cycle of love, loss and relief, ultimately reassured by the permanence of their idea of Sir Roger as much as his permanence in the pages of the *Spectator*.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 02:48:15, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.005

The continued reading of Addison's and Steele's essays in the Romantic period, and the emergence of Romantic character criticism about Sir Roger, established the *Spectator* as a gold standard for realist characterisation, a centennial 'favourite' against which nineteenth-century novelists might test their own strong characters. While the *Spectator*'s critical reception primed readers (and would-be writers) to think that memorable non-protagonist characters were unique assets to novelistic realism, the durability of the character-centric *Spectator*'s critical acclaim and high market value made it clear that 'favourite' characters were a good commercial investment for authors seeking to attract and sustain a readership.[65]

Caricature talk continued to insist on 'originality' throughout the nineteenth century in large part because readers continued to speculate on characters' 'originals' – after all, as discussed in Chapter 2, it was possible to discover extra-textual evidence that a writer had based a strong character on a real person. Saintsbury, in 1920, decries 'this search for "the original"' as 'the least valuable' of 'the bootless quests that literary criticism can undertake' – and yet the quest was a popular one. In 1884–85, Lord Brabourne's edition of previously unpublished correspondence by Jane Austen raised a flutter of curiosity among literary journalists and Janeites. T. E. Kebbel imagines that Austen, her writing process continually interrupted by neighbours, would have been 'rewarded for her self-possession by finding that many of her morning visitors were qualified to serve as models; and that, while she seemed to be listening with ready politeness to the gossip of some village bore, she was quietly taking his likeness, and forming in her own mind a Mr. Collins or a Miss Bates'.[66]

But readers' concern with 'real characters' was not necessarily, as Saintsbury implies, an unsophisticated reading that devalued an author's originality. When an article in the *Standard* stokes interest in Brabourne's edition, the emphasis is just as much on Austen's 'humour at work' as the identification of originals. Readers, the *Standard* implies, are interested in these letters because they preserve a trace of Austen's mental process in a singular originative moment. The letters might offer not an insight into the extended process of writing a novel, but a glimmer of creativity itself, the fantasised moment when a character comes into the world:

> Will these Letters display Miss Austen's humour at work upon real character, and exhibit her in the act of filling in a Mrs. Norris or a Mr. Elton from among her own acquaintances? To judge from some of the published Letters, we should say this is very likely. And if the anticipation is well founded, the promised volume should be one of the most delightful in the language.[67]

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 02:48:15, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.005

It is easy to misrepresent such remarks as the idle curiosity of readers with a simplistic understanding of literature. However, through the lens of Romantic caricature talk described in this chapter – its concepts of originality, realism and favouritism – the nuances of this language-game come into focus. The *Standard* reviewer anticipates Austen's letters being superlatively 'the most delightful' not, I argue, because readers in the 1880s were interested in Hampshire folk who lived a hundred years ago, but because they might witness the inception of their favourite characters. As the *Spectator*'s ideal of character-creation contains the necessity of an author who, like the Spectator, excels in observing and listening, so – conversely – the quest for 'the original' contains the desire to see the first textual trace of pure creative energy invisibly meeting raw materials.

My aim is not to argue that the *Spectator*'s comic non-protagonist characters directly influenced the distinctive Romantic-period realisms that I analyse in this book. My point is that the *Spectator* – its characterisation techniques, its ideals of character-writing and its critical reception as a model for strong characters starting in the late eighteenth century – is powerfully representative of the Romantic-period novel's inheritance from eighteenth-century literature's diverse combinations of character-writing with formal realism.

Part II explores how that inheritance is selectively re-purposed and recontextualised by caricature talk combining with characterisation technique in the realisms of Jane Austen, Walter Scott and Mary Shelley. As compared with the *Spectator*'s realism of character, Scott substitutes history for contemporaneity; moves from the *Spectator*'s limited social variety to a compendium of ethnic, regional, religious and professional characteristics; and plans, especially in the Magnum Opus editions, for the impending obsolescence of strongly historical characters.

Shelley might not seem to inherit much from the *Spectator*'s model of character realism: *Frankenstein* and 'Transformation' lack comic non-protagonist characters, and resemble Gothic tales more than 'English classics' by Fielding or Smollett. No source from the Romantic period admits to acquiring a 'favourite' from *Frankenstein*. But it is significant that Shelley's experiments in horror fiction develop writing techniques for a 'horrid realism' that happens to invert the concept of using particularised and varied characters to create pseudo-sensory pleasure – eliciting pseudo-sensory revulsion by continually drawing legible 'character' into tension with the heterogenous particulars of the material body.

For Austen, on the other hand, the fat body is legible within a concept of caricature as the aesthetic effect of self-indulgence. Under the aegis of

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 02:48:15, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.005

this ethics of caricature, Austen carries techniques for strong characterisation: her realism is put forward as accurate narration of a social phenomenon of people who 'really' think, speak, look and occupy space in 'caricatured' ways. Touting the new comic realism of Burney and Edgeworth, *Northanger Abbey* openly names the *Spectator* as the dotard of the genre, now coasting on a reputation for 'wit and humour' combined with 'knowledge of human nature' and the 'delineation of its varieties'. Austen seems unimpressed by decades of praise for the *Spectator*'s characters. Others might claim that Sir Roger is immortal; Austen recognises that strong characters must be reconceived for a new age.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 02:48:15, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.005

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 02:48:15, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009274227.005