



# Sycophants and Flatterers in Austen's Novels: A New Reading

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**Abstract:** Jane Austen has received the unabated attention of both the literary elite and the masses alike. The exploration of how she attempts social critique has been much discussed, materially through the analysis of irony, humour, and characterization, but always with a focus on the conflict faced by major characters. The secondary characters as a group have rarely been studied as a means of social critique and never in detail for all six of her major novels. The minor characters that this paper focusses on are those which can be labelled as 'Flatterers' and 'Sycophants' in conjunction with their objects; such pairs being present in all the novels. Their characterisation, humorous or otherwise, allows a critique of social norms not only through their overt speech and actions but also through the gaps, omissions, and silences apparent to discerning readers. This paper contends that, through close textual analysis of characterisation of 'Flatterers' (graduating in degree from the explicit Mr. Collins to the artless Harriet Smith) and their interaction with their 'objects' can strongly suggest an attempt to subvert/ resist accepted social and economic inequalities. This paper employs a Barthian close analysis of textual signifiers observing the "connotations of lexia" (1), the secondary meanings in the characterization of sycophants and their objects of flattery that emerge unwittingly during a reading. Rimmon Kenan's classification of character indicators, aid in the purpose of character reconstruction of these characters by readers as character markers by their connotated and denotated meanings and their variances allowing the researcher to discover unspoken/ unwritten subversions of social customs and institutions while supposedly perpetuating them.

**Key Words:** Jane Austen, novels, minor characters, flatterers, sycophants, Barthian lexia, character indicators, reconstruction, subversion, social critique

"Unwritten part of the text stimulates the reader's creative participation"

(Wolfgang Iser, The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach, 1972)

## 1. Flatterers and Sycophants in Jane Austen's Novels:

Since the resurgence of interest in Jane Austen's works after the mid-19th century publication of her Memoir by her nephew, Jane Austen has received the unabated attention of both the literary elite and the masses alike. The last quarter of the 19th century produced not only "formal criticism"(2) focussed on the elegance, the finesse, the perfection of her form and morality, but also criticism (e.g., of Richard Simpson), which focussed on the analysis of techniques which made her writing unique.

Simpson introduced two interpretative themes which later became the basis of much modern literary criticism of Austen's works: irony as a means of moral evaluation and humour as social critique. Most critics including Johnson have justifiably pointed out Austen's concerns with some of the ills of 19th century English society. Her criticism of traditional institutions especially as affecting the disenfranchised in society exists, however subtly she may have presented it. The exploration of how she attempts social critique too has been much discussed, materially through the



analysis of irony, humour, and characterization in general, but always with an emphasis on the conflict faced by major characters.

The Flatterers and Sycophants in Austen's novels are minor or secondary characters and have rarely been studied as a means of social critique except individually, and never as a group or in detail. These minor characters in conjunction with their objects, (such pairs being present in all the novels) deserve careful analysis to reveal how their role extends beyond the as yet accepted functions of humour, irony or plot development. Their characterisation, humorous or otherwise, allows a critique of social norms not only through their overt speech and actions but also through the gaps, omissions, and silences apparent to discerning readers.

This paper contends that, through the readers perception of these 'Flatterers' (graduating in degree from the explicit Mr. Collins to the artless Harriet Smith) and their interaction with their 'objects' (again varying in degree from The Lady Catherine to Emma) can strongly suggest an attempt to subvert/ resist accepted social and economic inequalities while superficially upholding them.

## 2. A brief literature review: critical commentary over the years on characters in Austen's novels:

Some of the earliest 'Reviews' and 'Notices' received by Austen as documented in Jane Austen : *The Critical Heritage Volume 1 1811-1870*, edited by B. C. Southam, and B.C. Southam Taylor & Francis Group, (1996), although narrow in scope, remark on aspects such as-the high comedy of the second chapter of Sense and Sensibility, the liveliness of the characterization and the vigour of the writing in Pride and Prejudice, the unnatural abruptness of the change in Darcy, from indifference to ardour; and how Jane Austen combines amusement and ethical teaching. The volume reproduces some of the important early commentary and praise by Scott: of "the precision and finish of the character-drawing", while failing to give individuality to the weaker ones (minor characters) namely the fools. He sees her technique and the creation of a fictional world which is faithful to the "ordinary life" of her period. The characters liked or disliked like real people. Whatley praises her as a Christian writer, but also because there is no sermonising in her writing. Charlotte Bronte complains about, Austen's lack of profundity and true passion, which she argues is a limitation; Ferrier's essay from the American Handbook of the mid-century recommends Austen as perfect in delineating the manners of the middle and lower classes in a "new and very difficult species of writing." In Lewes's: The great appraisal 1859, comments on character are limited to the characters being "never of a lofty or impassioned order" hence unable to challenge the higher faculties of the reader. Mrs Oliphant: comments on Austen's "scepticism/ "feminine cynicism." The character of Mr. Collins finds a special mention but only as a fool. Perfectly drawn completely believable but only as a ridiculous character. Richard Simpson: first serious critic to comment on her art: focussed on the analysis of techniques which made her writing unique. Simpson introduced two interpretative themes which later became the basis of much modern literary criticism of Austen's works: irony as a means of moral evaluation and humour as social critique. Macauley's superlative comment about Austen as comparable to Shakespeare is later taken up by Lewes in several reviews and introductions.

*Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage Volume 2 1870-1940*, edited by the same editors as the Vol 1, hold several essays discussed below; focussing how the mid-19th century publication of the "Memoir" by Austen's nephew, Austen-Leigh produced a resurgence of interest in her works, producing a slew of reviews and notices but the portrait painted in the Memoir of Jane Austen is that of a, reclusive English spinster, the "Dear Aunt Jane" working on her bits of ivory, distorted further the image of Austen, away from her artistic genius. Austen's reputation soared despite there being among the reviews a shared sense of the problem involved in introducing Jane Austen to a wider audience, to whom the novels were unknown. The key aspects of criticism that emerge from many of the essays relate to Jane Austen's exquisite, natural, detailed, elegant portrayal of provincial English life through the perspective of a gentle woman who was also a writer. Commentary was sometimes punctuated by notice of her heroines and rarely of the minor characters and fools such as Mr. Collins and Mrs Norris. Relevant to the research at hand among these is the review of the Memoir of 1817 by Anne Thackeray, a belle-lettriste type essay in the sentimental style; she finds all the minor characters, (especially the "bores") fascinating. Ruskin praises her for lack of sensationalism, while Mark Twain prided himself for being the arch anti-Austenite, violent in his dislike of her work. Offering not much logic for his dislike; declaring that her prose is "unreadable." A.C. Bradley best known for his essays on Shakespeare, in his lecture given at Cambridge in 1911 points out two distinct strains in Jane Austen; morality and humour. Though completely blended are still distinguishable for him. Comments on character are linked directly to their morality or their ability to generate humour. Virginia Woolf's review of 1913 suggests her concern with Austen as a woman novelist. She discusses the Austen's character's as satirical but without bitterness, depicting the absurdities of life. Other critics in the anthology include, Reginald Farrer's essay from the quarterly review, a century after Austen's death, is at once serious and convincing. His approach to Austen's characterization like that of John Mackinnon Robertson in *Modernness of Method* and William



Clymer in *The Provincial Jane Austen* is that “she does not need to describe them, they betray themselves at every word, and stand convicted on their own evidence.” Farrer’s comment on the implicit rather than explicit emotion in Austen’s scenes perfectly suited for the tastes of the subjective and objective reader and writer foreshadow the concept of readerly and writerly texts. He writes that “reading lies in eager cooperation with a sympathetic writer. “Edith Warton in her essay “Novels, pre-eminently of Character” (1925) makes a similar point about character and plot. In Austen’s best novels character leads the plot. Arnold Bennet’s 1928 essay is noticeable for his agreement with that Austen has an “unblinkered” view of the society of her period. Leading a way to discussion of social critique as a theme in the novels. Rebecca West’s 1932 preface to *Northanger Abbey* titled “the feminism of Jane Austen” leads the way to more feminist readings. West proposes that the treatment of Catherine Morland by General Tilney reflects Austen’s view and criticism of the position of women in society. Shattering the concept of romantic love. West’s analysis further supports the supposition of this research that Isabella Thorpe, whom she considers a coquette, may be one, not because of her psychology but rather to mitigate her powerlessness as a girl without a dowery. She comments that “the tragedy is that every sensible woman had to admit that there was a lot to be said for Isabella Thorpe’s aims and artifice, since there was no way of independence for women and the pleasantest way of dependence was matrimony. Husband hunting was shameful and horrid, but there was every reason why one should join in the hunt.” (p296) Justifying Isabella’s actions and redefining her function in the novel. Unfortunately, West further goes on to link this argument with aspects of Austen’s personal situation.

*Jane Austen Re-visited: A Feminist Evaluation of the Longevity and Relevance of the Austen Oeuvre* by Elizabeth Kollmann (2003): A thesis, takes into consideration Austen’s social milieu and patriarchal inheritance. It argues that “Austen writes within the framework of patriarchy (for example by marrying off her heroines) possibly because she is aware that in order to survive as a woman (writer) in a male-favouring world and in a publishing, world dominated by men, her critique needs to be covert. The same can be said of some of Austen’s minor characters. From her fiction we can infer that male power is enshrined in the very structure of society, and this makes us aware of women’s lack of power in her time. Austen’s novels, however, are not merely novels of powerlessness but of empowerment. By creating rounded women characters and by giving them the power to judge, to refuse and to write.” (3) Austen challenges the stereotyped view of woman as either overpowering monster or weak and fragile angel. In addition, her novels seem to question women’s inherited identity and to suggest that qualities such as emotionality and mothering are not natural aspects of being a woman. Because she suggests ways in which women might empower themselves, albeit within patriarchal parameters. Kollmann’s thesis can be used to argue the case for many of the female characters who are labelled as Coquettes or as flatterers. In the book: “In the Meantime: *Character and Perception in Jane Austen's Fiction* by Susan Morgan, the issue of perception-its powers and limitations, triumphs and failures is at the centre of Austen’s fiction. As interesting as this work is in its examination of characters and how they perceive or struggle to perceive their objective reality, there is hardly any mention of the secondary characters and their struggles. Morgan divides the work into novels of crisis and novels of passage on the basis of plot.

While summarising the abundance of critical views and continuous interpretative and theoretical commentary on Austen’s characters, found in essays and books over the centuries may be arduous, yet it is not impossible to say that the Flatterers and Sycophants have never been examined as a group, their role never examined in detail (there are only passing references) in relation to the covert resistance they offer to some of the oppressive norms of the period.

### 3.Methodology:

Analysis of Characterisation based on Barthesian ‘lexia’, ‘character indicators’ suggested by Rimmon Kenan and Iser’s Phenomenological approach are used to analyse characterization of selected minor characters (Flatterers and Sycophants) in Austen’s novels.

Barthes in his analysis of Balzac’s *Sarassine* and Poe’s *Valdemar* describes ‘lexia’ as units of meaning. He employs close analysis of textual signifiers observing the “connotations of lexia, the secondary meanings” (4). Rimmon Kennan in her book: *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* describes, Character Indicators; the suggestions given by Kennan classifies character indicators into two categories, “(1) Direct Definition and (2) Indirect Presentation. Direct Definition includes: acts of commission and omission, speech, appearance, and environment. Indirect presentation includes analogies between characters, their names, landscape analogies” (5) etc. This framework in combination with Barthes’ process of close reading of connotated and denotated meaning can offer a unique interpretative analysis. As expressed in Iser’s essay: *The reading process: a phenomenological approach*: not only what is written but also the unwritten can “stimulate a reader’s participation.” (6) This same approach will be used to prove how analysis of character markers for their connotated and denotated meanings and their variances can allow the researcher to discover unspoken/ unwritten subversions of social customs and institutions.



#### 4.Characterization through close reading and analysis:

The Flatterers and Sycophants in the novels *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) and *Mansfield Park* (1814) can be clubbed together as the Flatterers in these texts cannot be considered merely humorous or ironical but also are negative in their function. *Sense And Sensibility* is a novel in which the themes of love and marriage dominate; the minor characters, of Miss Lucy Steel and her sister Nancy are the two dominant Sycophants along with the objects of their flattery: Elinor Dashwood, Lady Middleton and Fanny Dashwood.

The characters, of Miss Lucy Steel and her sister Anne have been clearly intended to be negative characters. We see this through the narratorial voice as well as the observations made by the female protagonist Elinor Dashwood progressively throughout the novel. We see both Nancy Steel and Lucy Steel as characterized in contrast to the positive female characters all the while condemned by Elinor and Marianne Dashwood whose sense and sensibilities are the lens through which the reader's judgement may be formed. However, a closer and contrary reading of these characters is possible. The novel while overtly condemning the social limitations, power structures and class prejudices imposed on Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, covertly suggest the same imposition on the Steel sisters. The only difference being their method of resisting and overcoming these impositions. This chapter will attempt to examine how the text suggests such alternative characterization through the application of Roland Barthes' methodology of textual analysis and character reconstruction. For e.g. When reconstructing the character of Lucy Steel, Austen uses contradictory character indicators. Lucy is characterized separately from her elder sister Nancy by direct definition as "naturally clever... just and amusing" (7) an acceptable companion at times, to Elinor. This positive characterization is in clear contradiction of other direct nominations seen by the disapproval of Elinor and the narratorial voice, of Lucy's "thorough want of delicacy, of rectitude, and integrity of mind, which her attentions, her assiduities, her flatteries at the Park betrayed." The narratorial nomination of Lucy's "sharp quick eye, and a smartness of air" which "gave distinction to her person" is contradicted with a lack of "actual elegance or grace" in the same sentence. The connotations of "sharp" suggests shrewdness, while the "quick eye", her ability to see swiftly what is to her advantage. Why do we, the reader perceive these as negative character traits when Elinor the protagonist too possesses them? Does Elinor too not try to please Lady Middleton when it suits her? The text on close analysis betrays, a greater similarity of situation and temperament between the Misses Steel and the Dashwood sisters which paves the way for a justification of the argument proposed by this paper. Next characters to be focussed on are from *Mansfield Park* are: Mrs. Norris and Mary Crawford. Following the earlier mentioned methodology, the study will explore the gaps in the text which suggest how these characters too struggle against limitations imposed by class and gender. Mrs Norris, though clearly drawn as a negative character who actively causes the distress of the timid heroine Fanny, is herself in a situation of partial dependency on Sir Bertram, her brother-in-law. Her status as a widow of limited means also leaves her with limited choice of behaviour. Only her Sycophancy/extreme flattery of Sir Bertram and his daughters allow her to be noticed and her opinion sought at Mansfield Park. Mary Crawford on the other hand is characterised with both positive and negative indicators. Her acts of commission and omission are both beneficial and at times at cross purposes to those of the novel's protagonists. One of the most complex characters from Austen's oeuvre, the readers often find themselves sympathising with her thoughts and actions. Mary Crawford though drawn as a young woman of independent means and substantial dowry, finds it difficult to woo Edward without resorting to flattery. Flattery is a means of persuasion.

The Flatterer in *Persuasion* (1817) is Mrs Clay. The flattery practiced by her threatens the positions of Elizabeth Eliot as well as that of Anne Eliot, the female protagonist to some extent. She is clearly put together by Austen as a caution against the acceptance of an outsider (Mrs Clay) in the inner circle due to their ability to flatter, while neglecting close family members (Anne Eliot) who truly deserve consideration and love. A careful analysis of Mrs. Clays speech and actions reveal a character reconstruction more valid and acceptable to the critical 21<sup>st</sup> century reader. As a widow of limited means, her survival in society/ upward mobility is dependent on her ability to flatter Sir Elliot, Elizabeth Elliot and the opportunistic heir to the Elliot name. Her sycophancy is carefully crafted to elevate her monetary and social status, it will not be however unfair to state that any woman in her situation in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, if ambitious had no other options open to her, to prosper.

This chapter scrutinises the characterization of Isabela Thorpe and General Tilney in *Northanger Abby* and Mrs Clay in *Persuasion*. We are shown Isabela characterized as a ruthless manipulator, using flattery to achieve her objective of befriending Catharine Morland like General Tilney. A closer analysis of these characters allows a reader to go beyond the traditional roles assigned to them of villain, tyrant and gold digger.

In the analysis of the novel *Emma* (1815) focus is on the characters: Philip Elton, Frank Churchill and Harriet Smith as the flatterers. Their interactions with the protagonist contribute to the key conflicts of the novels. The flattery by the male characters in "Emma" is clearly artful, deliberate, while that of Harriet Smith



is considered artless and sincere. This chapter will be an engaging analysis of the gaps and silences of the text which suggest to the modern reader a more nuanced conception of these characters and make their motivations more understandable to the present-day readers.

Mr. William Collins, Mr. Wickham and Miss Caroline Bingley are the Flatterers and Sycophants in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). Mr Collins is perhaps the most discussed character among Austen's flatterers. He has always been read as a silly, narrow-minded and pompous man. A close reading of character indicators will however help the reader to reconsider this sycophant through what is left unsaid or said indirectly in the text. Especially with the help of the background Austen creates for Mr. Collins, his upbringing and the nature of his father. Similarly, this chapter will examine the characterization of Wickham. A closer analysis suggests another mode of resistance offered to inequalities of wealth, class and a lack of social mobility present in British society. Caroline Bingley's flattery of Darcy is often direct and crude. Her characterization though overtly shows her attempt to uphold rigid notions of class, position and economic status, may on a closer examination suggest that her attempts to manoeuvre her position in society is as much a struggle against restrictions of class mobility and restrictions placed on women in marriage within the 'gentry' as a class, primarily because her fortune comes from her father's success in trade.

## 5. Conclusion:

A reconsideration and reconstruction of the minor and at times secondary characters in Austen's novels, specifically those drawn as the flatterers and sycophants will draw out newer more nuanced appreciation of their facets and function than were considered possible. Most of these characters have been characterized by both direct definition and indirect presentation, but the subtlest of these are by indirect presentation. Where the reader's mind constructs a character indirectly through analogies or speech and actions of other characters, making a more elusive or contrary reading possible. For a greater appreciation of how these secondary characters resist the limitations placed on them by societal norms, class divisions and gender expectations, an understanding of the social and cultural customs of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century that extends beyond the six Austen novels to include reading works of writers such as Elizabeth Gaskell, Charlotte Bronte and Fanny Burney would prove beneficial. A clearer picture of what this study understands a modern critical reader to be then emerges.

Further research is possible in reconsidering and reconstructing other minor characters of novels by Austen and her contemporaries applying the methodologies and frame of reference used in this study. All texts, especially the realistic novels of the 19<sup>th</sup> century which represented their characters as having complex psychologies depicted through detailed rendition of their thought process or social interactions are best suited for such a reconsideration. Such a study of character markers can help in a better understanding of how context of the reader may overpower the conventions of verisimilitude developed by 19<sup>th</sup> century writers.

Last but not the least, it is important to mention here that a much more detailed and closer reading of the characterization of Flatterers and how they interact with their objects of flattery are essential for a comprehensive analysis of all six novels than what has been attempted in this paper. This would naturally be a much lengthier enterprise that is possible to accommodate in a scholarly paper such as the one presented here.

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