

**Chapter 1: Introduction**

Daniel J. Kapust  
Assistant Professor  
Department of Political Science  
University of Wisconsin-Madison

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Please note: This is a rough draft of the introductory chapter of a larger project, and very much a work in progress – *especially* the outline of the book at the end of the chapter. Please do not cite without the author’s permission.

I

Flattery is the subject of some of the first stories many children will hear. In Aesop’s fable, *The Raven and the Fox*, the fox observes the raven in a tree with a piece of meat. Unable to climb the tree, he decides to use the only weapon he has, deploying speech strategically to get what he wants. His tactic is to engage in flattery:

Of all the birds you are by far the most beautiful. You have such elegant proportions, are so stately and sleek. You were ideally made to be the king of all the birds. And if you only had a voice you would surely be the king.<sup>1</sup>

Not wanting to disappoint such an earnest admirer, the raven decided to show off his voice and, in doing so, dropped the meat to the ground, giving the fox what he wanted all along. After getting what he wants, the fox provides the raven with some counsel: “Oh, raven, if only you also had judgment [*phrenas*], you would want for nothing to be the king of the birds.” The fable [*logos*] itself provides a timely lesson to “all fools” – *andra anoeton*.

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<sup>1</sup> *Aesop: The Complete Fables*. Translated by Olivia and Robert Temple. Penguin: New York, 1998. The Greek consulted is Émile Chambry, *Ésope: Fables*. Société d’édition Les Belles Lettres: Paris, 1926.

The child learns many lessons from this story, not the least of which is that flatterers say things that they do not mean. That is, they are insincere. Not only are flatterers insincere; they say things which they know are not true. The child also learns *why* flatterers are so dangerous. Through flattery, they can manipulate us into doing what we would not otherwise do – and what we ought not to do. Presumably, the raven would not have dropped the meat had he not been flattered by the fox. The pathway for this manipulation is self-love, as it is with the raven, and it is abetted by a lack of self-knowledge – were the raven less deceived about his own capacities, he would know that he sings poorly. The child also learns something about what a certain kind of flattery is, and what a flatterer does. The *cunning* flatterer speaks insincerely and with full knowledge of his insincerity, and the cunning flatterer says things that are not true in order to get something particular. If the fox had been sincere– that is, if he actually thought the raven’s beauty and voice should be praised, and there was a “congruence between avowal and actual feeling”<sup>2</sup> – and if the raven actually *had* a beautiful voice, then this would be a situation of straightforward praise: the fox would have meant what he said, and what he said would have been true. If you’ve got something that someone else wants, then, you should be careful not to be deceived by his praise lest he manipulate you into giving him what he wants through fraud.

This is an ethical lesson, of course – the story has, after all, a moral. But children also learn more explicitly political lessons about flattery, and another children’s story picks up a different dimension of flattery, one that differs in important ways from the manipulative behavior of the cunning fox. Andersen’s *The Emperor’s New Clothes* features an emperor who was exceedingly vain, caring about nothing unless “it gave him a chance to show off his new

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<sup>2</sup> Lionel Trilling. *Sincerity and Authenticity*. Harvard University Press. Cambridge. 1972. 2.

clothes.”<sup>3</sup> When two swindlers – cunning and foxlike flatterers themselves - came to the emperor’s city, claiming not only to be able to weave the most beautiful fabrics, but that their products “had the amazing ability of becoming invisible to those who were unfit for their posts or just hopelessly stupid,” the vain emperor immediately decided that he needed to have this clothing.<sup>4</sup>

What unfolds is a fascinating lesson about vanity and insecurity on the part of superiors and subordinates. The emperor, wondering about the swindlers’ progress in weaving the cloth, sent his “honest old minister” to check on them, assuming that he would be best suited to do so because of his “good sense.”<sup>5</sup> Seeing no cloth, the minister pretends to do so, lest he be thought unfit for, and hence lose, his position. A second minister fares no better, pretending to see and admire the cloth as well, lest he also be thought unfit. And when the emperor himself goes to inspect their work prior to parading through town wearing his new clothing, in the company of “a select group of people” and his two trusted ministers, he cannot see the cloth either.<sup>6</sup> But he, too, pretends to be able to see it, lest he be thought foolish or unfit for office – as do his courtiers, who were similarly unable to see any cloth. The emperor, his ministers, his courtiers – all pretend that he is actually wearing the clothing, with his courtiers even pretending to carry the train of his garment during the parade; even the onlookers in the town, observing their emperor

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<sup>3</sup> “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” in *The Annotated Hans Christian Andersen*, edited by Maria Tatar, translated by Maria Tatar and Julie K. Allen. W.W. Norton and Company: New York, 2008. ” 5.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 6.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 6.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 9.

out in his new clothing, pretend to see his clothing, lest they, too, be thought foolish. Only “a little child” is able to say what everyone else is thinking: “he isn’t wearing anything at all.”<sup>7</sup> Once the child has spoken the truth, the townspeople echo his observation, yet the emperor persists in his parade, thinking to himself, “I must go through with it now, parade and all.”<sup>8</sup> Throughout the entire farce, of course, the swindlers have been pocketing the gold and silk that they had been pretending to weave into the invisible cloth.

As opposed to Aesop’s fable, in which we are presented with a cunning flatterer in the figure of the fox, we are presented with something else in Andersen’s tale. To be sure, the two swindlers are, like the fox, cunning, and they engage in flattery, preying on the vanity and ignorance of the emperor and his ministers, in order to get what they want: gold. And their flattering play upon his vanity causes the emperor to do what he ought not to do while securing themselves benefits. Yet when we turn from the swindlers to the counselors, whose flattery occupies far more of the narrative than the swindlers’ greed-driven flattery does, it is not simply their greed that causes them to behave as they do. Rather, they are afraid of losing their offices, as they are subordinates in positions of dependence on the emperor. Were they to admit that they see nothing, they would, in effect, be admitting that they were either foolish or unqualified for office, admissions that would not sit well with their superior. They flatter through fear of lost position: their dependence on the emperor’s favor makes them behave in a servile manner, as they alter their speech and behavior to maintain their positions due to the power of their superior. In doing so, they reinforce their superior’s tendencies, reflecting to him what he, in ignorance, sees of himself. The fox, to be sure, is in a situation of dependence of a sort – his satisfaction of

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 13.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 16.

his desires is dependent upon the raven. But it is not as if the raven will have much power over him once the fox has the raven's meat; there is nothing about the circumstances of the fox that suggests that he will be constrained to flatter outside of this instance. By contrast, the flattering behavior of the counselors seeks to negotiate the hierarchical relationship with the emperor in which they find themselves, and thus to maintain their positions.

That flattery is an ethical and political problem is suggested by these stories, stories which in turn provided two images of flattery; that it was considered to be so through much of the history of western political thought is evident through a cursory survey. Plato, in *Phaedrus*, contrasts the frank speaker (and true lover) with the flatterer (and false lover), while in *Gorgias*, he developed a critique of conventional oratory centering on its status as a form of flattery, connecting it to democracy and tyranny in that work and *Republic*; Aristotle, in the *Politics*, linked it to tyranny as well. Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Cicero in *On Friendship*, and Plutarch in *How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend* opposed the flatterer to the frank-speaking friend. The flattered monarch – and the ill-effects of flattery on monarchs and their subjects - was an important concern for Isocrates, as it was for Pliny and Tacitus, whether the issue was how to deal with flatterers, flattery's connection to tyranny, or the corrosive effect of despotic rule on frank speech. For John of Salisbury and Christine de Pizan, flattery corrupted monarchy, leading to disharmony and even tyranny. In Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*, flattery is the tactic deployed to captivate the mind of the prince by the courtier-counselor; in Machiavelli's *Prince*, the ability to detect and prevent flattery is a sign of princely prudence. Hobbes preferred monarchy to non-monarchy in part because it better resisted flattery; Locke wanted even prerogative power to be limited, by contrast, in part because of the danger of flatterers. Unlike writers who were wary of flatterer, however, Mandeville celebrated flattery's role in political

socialization; Rousseau, deeply influenced by Mandeville, saw it as a manifestation of a false and corruptive politeness, while Smith, reacting to Mandeville, mitigates flattery by distinguishing between the desire for praise and the desire for being praiseworthy. Monarchs' susceptibility to flattery was an important point raised against monarchy by figures such as Milton and Sidney in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and the political conditions that gave rise to flattery – along with flattering ministers – were common themes in 18<sup>th</sup> century Britain and the American colonies, evident in works such as *Cato's Letters*. Burke, in his *Speech to the Electors of Bristol*, contrasted his behavior as the electorate's representative with flattery; Hamilton argued that while the republican principle required responsiveness, it stopped well short of the kind of flattery associated with demagoguery, honing in on the danger of the “adulator.”<sup>9</sup>

Flattery's salience in these works of political theory and others, however, is rather puzzling, given how little attention is now given to the topic as a political problem. A search of philosophy and political science journals produces only two results; one piece, despite its title, deals with defamation, not flattery, while the other deals with flattery, though from a largely ethical perspective (and in a way that I find to be problematic, as I discuss below).<sup>10</sup> And while two English-language books have been published on flattery in recent years, along with a

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<sup>9</sup> Alexander Hamilton. *Federalist 71*. In *Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay: The Federalist, with Letters to “Brutus.”* Edited by Terrence Ball. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 349.

<sup>10</sup> The first article is Kevin Williams. ““Only Flattery is Safe”: Political Speech and the Defamation Act 1996.” *The Modern Law Review*. 60.3. May 1997. 388-93. The second is Yuval Eylon and David Heyd. “Flattery.” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* Vol. 77, No. 3, November 2008: 685-704.

translation of a German book on “arse-licking,” none of these works are centrally concerned with flattery as a political problem. If our apparent lack of concern with flattery is puzzling in light of the stories told to children that involve flattery, it is even more puzzling when we briefly survey the place of flattery in the history of political thought.

If flattery is no longer an important political concern, understanding why this is so is an interesting problem in itself, and I will devote some attention to this over the course of the book, and especially in the final chapter.<sup>11</sup> I will argue that, despite appearances to the contrary, flattery is – and ought to be – a matter of political importance, and that it is related to several broader themes in political inquiry. Before getting to this claim, however, I should say a few things about what recent studies of flattery have had to say, what I take flattery to be, and how it differs from related phenomena, such as hypocrisy, lying, and bullshit.

## II

While two English-language books have appeared since 2000 that deal with flattery - Stengel’s *You’re too Kind : A Brief History of Flattery* and Regier’s *In Praise of Flattery* – neither is centrally concerned with understanding the phenomenon of flattery as a *political* problem. Stengel’s book – aptly described in its title as *A Brief History of Flattery* - is written for a popular audience, and covers an impressive array of sources and periods, ranging from non-human primates to ancient Egypt, to the troubadours, to colonial, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup> century America, to 20<sup>th</sup> century New York. Regier’s book, though richly researched and an invaluable source for

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<sup>11</sup> One potential answer has to do with the creation of representative democracy, especially in the American context, an answer that may be less useful with the strengthening of the modern executive and the development of what Tulis terms the “rhetorical presidency.”

a wide array of reactions to and understandings of flattery, does not develop an overarching interpretive argument, per se, so much as provide a survey of what Regier terms “real flattery in real situations.”<sup>12</sup>

Miller’s 2003 *Faking It* features a chapter dealing with flattery and praise – titled “Flattery and Praise,” appropriately enough. Yet Miller seems to doubt the possibility of distinguishing between flattery and praise, suggesting that “flattery can be sincere and true.”<sup>13</sup> *Not* engaging in flattery requires that the one who is praising have nothing at all to gain, a possibility hinted at, in Miller’s example, by Hamlet’s words to Horatio, who he asks, “Why should the poor be flatter’d?”<sup>14</sup> What this suggests is that it is awfully difficult for anyone with anything to gain *not* to engage in flattery when saying kind things to another. This is so because we desire to be flattered, whether through self-love or our natural sociability, and “praise is often rewarded by the person praised.”<sup>15</sup> Miller’s account strikes me as overly broad; even if we grant that there is a basic similarity between praise and flattery – namely, the use of positive language to reinforce certain behaviors or attributes – this does not mean that they are inseparable, or that not being a flatterer requires that one have *nothing* to gain in speaking well of another. I might, after all, enjoy telling a musician after a performance that I enjoyed the performance; this does not seem to be flattery. Part of what it means to flatter someone else is to manipulate that person to do something she would not otherwise do, and which she surely would not do if she knew she were being flattered. While we might praise someone for acting well, it seems intuitive that the

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<sup>12</sup> Willis Goth Regier. *In Praise of Flattery*. University of Nebraska Press: Lincoln. 2007. xiv.

<sup>13</sup> Miller, William Ian. *Faking It*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge. 2003. 98.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 101.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 98.

praised individual ought to engage in that behavior regardless of praise, whereas the flattered person ought not to engage in the behavior she was were flattered into doing.

I stated earlier that a search of major political science and philosophy journals for the term produces few articles that deal with flattery as a topic. The notable exception is Heyd and Eylon's article, simply titled "Flattery." Heyd and Eylon describe flattery (in Shklar's terminology) as an "ordinary vice."<sup>16</sup> It is ordinary in the sense that it is common to many different cultures, and it is ordinary in the sense that it is hardly the worst vice that can be imagined. In fact, it might not even register as a significant vice in many moral theories, though they suggest it is quite significant in the virtue ethics tradition, and especially the Platonic tradition. From a Platonic perspective, flattery highlights the "contrast between the real and the fake," along with Plato's "insistence on the moral importance of the interplay between the personal and the social."<sup>17</sup> They make a useful, and important, distinction between flattery and servility, in that the prior is an "overt communicative act," and the latter a "psychological disposition;" moreover, they point out that flattery works only insofar as the one being flattered does not know she is being flattered. As opposed to the similar phenomenon of hypocrisy, flattery is "addressed to a particular person," and "while flattery is concerned with the merits of another person, hypocrisy is primarily concerned with the image of oneself."<sup>18</sup> We can deceive ourselves, but we cannot flatter ourselves – nor can superiors normally "be said to flatter"

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<sup>16</sup> Yuval Eylon and David Heyd. "Flattery." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* Vol. 77, No. 3, November 2008: 685-704. 685.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 686.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 686, 688, 701.

inferiors.<sup>19</sup> And whereas there is a manipulative flatterer, such as Aesop's fox, there is also a kind of flatterer who does not have an ulterior motive – they label the prior a snake, and the latter a dog.<sup>20</sup> The dog, which they locate in Plato's *Phaedrus*, is marked by an “excessive need and weakness manifested in overabundant praise and insensitivity to its proper context.”<sup>21</sup>

Drawing especially on Plato, Eylon and Heyd suggest that flattery corrupts both the flattered and the flatterer, though it is more harmful for the prior than the latter. Moreover, the flatterer can only succeed in her activity insofar as the victim is vicious – though not necessarily wicked. After all, a concern with the opinion of others is not wicked. Either way, flattery is a vice, and its vicious character leads the authors to reject Mandeville's account of flattery as constituting the foundation of the social order: “by treating the possibility of the whole social order as the function of the universally effective flattery of the whole citizenship, Mandeville seems to lose the very core of the concept of flattery.”<sup>22</sup>

As will become clear in my subsequent discussion, I think that it is important not to label flattery as a vice, *tout court*; there is an important distinction between a slave who flatters his master to avoid being whipped and a conman who flatters his mark to take advantage of him. Similarly, one can flatter a single person, or a large number of persons – one need only think of the paeans paid to the wisdom or virtue of the American people (or the people of a particular

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 686.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 689.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 694.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 703.

state, city, county, or electoral district) by politicians and candidates. Nor am I in sympathy with their critique of Mandeville, as I will discuss in Chapter 6.

### III

I want now to say a few more things about how I understand flattery, looking back to my earlier discussion of Aesop and Andersen. As we saw in discussing Aesop, the fox is a flatterer in two respects: he speaks insincerely, and what he says is straightforwardly false: the crow does not have a beautiful voice; he *crows*. Had he meant what he said – that is, had he been sincere – and had the crow a beautiful voice – that is, had his utterance been true – we would have encountered praise, and not flattery. This is about as clear of a case of flattery as we can hope to see. A similar dynamic is at play in Andersen’s tale: the counselors, the swindlers, and even the townspeople say what they do not mean – namely, that the emperor’s clothing is beautiful – and they say what is straightforwardly false, and what they believe to be false. What this highlights, I suggest, are two dimensions of the phenomenon of flattery: the flatterer speaks falsely and insincerely. That is, what the flatterer says is not true, or at the very least exaggerated, and the flatterer does not mean what she says. Importantly, she says things that appeal to the self-love, or vanity, of those she addresses. This sketch of flattery finds support in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which lists among the senses of the verb “to flatter” the following: “to please or win the favour of (a person) by obsequious speech or conduct; to court, fawn upon,” or “To praise or compliment unduly or insincerely,” “To play upon the vanity or impressionableness of (a person); to beguile or persuade with artful blandishments; to coax, wheedle.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*. Second Edition, 1989. Accessed on January 10, 2012 via <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/71221>.

Flattery, then, involves intent and truth, but is also a relational concept. That is, it refers “simultaneously to two entities that stand in relation to one another.”<sup>24</sup> Just as we cannot understand what it means to be a parent without understanding the concept “child,” we cannot understand what it means to be a flatterer without understanding what it means to be flattery’s object. Flattery is not defined solely by the intent of the speaker and the content of the utterance; it involves the relationship between the speaker and the addressee. In the examples given above, the flatterer has something to gain from the person being flattered, and is an inferior of some sort – a social or political dependent, someone lacking a particular kind of good, someone desiring a certain form of power. This is not to say that the categories are always clear-cut; there can be some ambiguity, evident in the American version of the television program *The Office*. While Michael Scott is, at times, the object of flattery – especially at the hands of Andrew Bernard – he will, on occasion, engage in flattery himself. To be sure, he would seem to be the most powerful figure in the office, controlling resources, promotions, and professional status. Yet he depends on his subordinates for goods as well – especially for their affection, which he craves. And while Dwight Schrute might seem to flatter Michael, he does not, since he means what he says when he praises Michael and believes it to be true.

We can, of course, imagine that someone may utter praise of someone else in all sincerity, but that she says things that are false in the process – evident in the expression “a face only a mother could love.” For example, someone who does not know anything about basketball and is well-disposed toward me may observe me make a single shot from the free-throw line (at random, I can assure you) and say, “Wow, you’re very good at basketball!” Surely she is sincere

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<sup>24</sup> Andrew Rehfeld. “The Concepts of Representation.” *American Political Science Review*.

105.3. August 2011. 631-41, 637.

in what she says – she does not *intend* to deceive or manipulate me, but to praise me, and believes what she is saying to be true; she simply does not know what she is talking about. Though this seems similar to flattery, I would suggest that she is simply in error.

Similarly, we can imagine a (better) world in which I am actually quite good at basketball, and another person (who loathes me) observes me playing and utters the *true* statement (albeit through gritted teeth), “You are good at basketball.” But this person so loathes me that she does not intend to praise me at all, and is entirely insincere; rather, she is doing so because she is in a crowd of onlookers who also know that I am quite a good basketball player, and states the fact for the sake of fitting in.<sup>25</sup> In the language of Trilling, there is no congruence between the avowal and the feeling. Though this person speaks insincerely, she is not quite engaging in flattery. Flattery is, to be sure, a kind of deception, akin to lying or hypocrisy. The person giving grudging praise isn’t really lying – after all, she knows that I am, in fact, good at basketball. And she isn’t quite doing what the fox or the weavers were doing – she isn’t saying something that she knows to be false because it appeals to my over-inflated sense of self-worth. In this instance, I suggest that she is engaging in something closer to hypocrisy. As Runciman suggests, “hypocrisy involves the construction of a persona...that generates some kind of false impression,” an impression that, if created properly, “extends beyond the instant of the lie

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<sup>25</sup> I had a similar experience many times while an assistant professor at the University of Georgia, where my former department head (a dear friend), was a Duke alumnus and fan. I, being a Maryland alumnus and fan, so loathed Duke that I could only admit their merit through clenched jaws.

itself.”<sup>26</sup> Her concern could be me (perhaps I am worthy of being deceived in such a way), or the audience, in whose good graces she wishes to remain and not be thought a poor sport.

Finally, we can imagine that best of worlds (and hopefully not Panglossian), in which I am not only good at basketball, but the person praising me does not loathe me, knows a bit about basketball, has nothing to gain from me, and simply wants to compliment me on my excellence. This, presumably, is a situation of straightforward praise (pace Miller).

None of these phenomena are quite what I have in mind when I describe flattery. A flatterer speaks insincerely to please and manipulate an audience, and what she says is not true. To stay with the current example, a flatterer would say, on seeing me make a free-throw (in the non-ideal world), “Wow, you’ve got game!” She would give no overt signs of sarcasm, at least if she was good at flattery, though she would know that I was not, in fact, good at basketball. But she would imagine that I would believe her, pushed to credulity by my self-love, and regard her in a favorable light. And if we asked why she did this, we would imagine that she had something to gain from me – perhaps I am wealthy, yet not a very good basketball player.

Flattery, it is worth noting, is not identical to hypocrisy, lying, or bullshit, though flatterers may be hypocrites, are liars, and often engage in bullshit. What makes someone a hypocrite, again, is constructing a persona aimed at creating a false impression about one’s character, but what really makes someone a hypocrite is a “prior commitment not to be inconsistent, rather than the fact of inconsistency.”<sup>27</sup> A liar, meanwhile, pretends to be

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<sup>26</sup> David Runciman. *Political Hypocrisy: The Mask of Power, from Hobbes to Orwell and Beyond*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2008. 9.

<sup>27</sup> Runciman. *Political Hypocrisy*, 9.

representing the truth in speech while saying what he believes to be untrue, and seeks to create a false impression in the mind of his auditor; but he may not be deploying flattery in doing so. What he relies on is not the self-love of his auditor so much as his gullibility or ignorance. And while flatterers often engage in something much like bullshitting, not all bullshitters are flatterers, and not all flatterers are bullshitters; the essence of the bullshitter, and what “the bullshitter hides...is that the truth-values of his statements are of no central interest to him...his intention is neither to report the truth nor to conceal it.”<sup>28</sup> He bullshits because he is expected to say *something*, and especially “to provide honest representations of himself.”<sup>29</sup>

#### IV

Having given a brief account of flattery and what I take it to be, and how it differs from hypocrisy, lying, and bullshit, I’ll say a bit more about its relationship to political inquiry. I suggested above that while flattery was an important concern in the history of political thought, it does not seem to matter all that much for contemporary political inquiry. Yet the concerns that emerge in exploring flattery are echoed by three strains of political inquiry: scholarship on republicanism, rhetoric, and representation.

Scholars exploring the republican tradition, whether in a historical vein (e.g. Skinner) or a more normative vein (e.g. Pettit), describe a way of thinking about political life that centers on a distinct notion of what it means to be free: namely, non-domination (Pettit’s formulation) or independence (Skinner’s frequent formulation). To be dominated is to be in a situation analogous to that of a slave’s relationship to her master. A slave may be interfered with – or not interfered

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<sup>28</sup> Harry G. Frankfurt. *On Bullshit*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2005. 55.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 65.

with – according to her master’s whims, and not according to a known standing rule to which she may have recourse in challenging her master’s authority, let alone with the certainty that her interests will be considered by her master.

Because of the slave’s tenuous position – or, more generally, because of the tenuous position of dominated persons – she may engage in strategic behavior, such as flattery. Indeed, this was one of the undesirable features of tyranny in the republican tradition, and one of the ways in which those subject to tyrannical rule were like slaves – a common theme in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century English and American criticisms of monarchical rule and courtly life. As Skinner notes, “No one can hope to speak truth to power if everyone is obliged to cultivate the flattering arts required to appease a ruler on whose favor everyone depends.”<sup>30</sup> Charles I in particular was subject to such criticisms, as we shall see in Chapter 5, but the theme was widely featured in republican political thought from Roman times.

The distortive effects of domination on speech are not simply a historical concern. If we approach republicanism as a theory that speaks to contemporary social and political concerns, we can imagine any number of relationships of domination in which the subordinate engages in flattery – the employee, wife, student, prisoner, or child.<sup>31</sup> As Pettit puts it,

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<sup>30</sup> Quentin Skinner. *Liberty Before Liberalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. 90.

<sup>31</sup> I recall having realized that I was being flattered in the recent past only a few times, and all but one instance were carried out by students seeking entry to a course, a letter of recommendation, or a rescheduling of their final.

The self-censorship or self-inhibition that the person practices need not involve actively thwarting desire; it will occur just so far as there are any options, otherwise desired or undesired, that a wish to keep the dominating party sweet would stop them taking.<sup>32</sup>

Individuals in such a position are worse off than they would be if they were not dominated:

“They find themselves in a position where they are demeaned by their vulnerability, being unable to look the other in the eye, and where they may even be forced to fawn or toady or flatter in the attempt to ingratiate themselves.”<sup>33</sup>

This is not the only theme in contemporary political theory scholarship to which flattery is relevant. Stepping back to my earlier discussion of flattery, a key point that emerged was that flatterers speak insincerely. Someone who engages in flattery is seeking to create a false impression about her own mental state, and, in so doing, says things which she does not believe to be true. Such behavior – insincerity combined with falsehood – is highly strategic, and as such, it goes against the presuppositions of deliberative theories of democracy, be they Rawlsian or Habermasian. This is due to these theories relying, in part, on the ethical quality of discourse in order to secure political legitimacy. The flatterer, in effect, violates *all* of the important features of the mode of communication appropriate to deliberation – “claims to truth, normative rightness, and sincerity.”<sup>34</sup> Whether we are thinking of deliberative democracy in a Rawlsian or Habermasian vein, flatterers do not tell the truth and they do not even believe that their lies are

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<sup>32</sup> Philip Pettit. *A Theory of Freedom: From the Psychology to the Politics of Agency*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. 137.

<sup>33</sup> Philip Pettit. *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. 5.

<sup>34</sup> Elizabeth Markovits. *The Politics of Sincerity: Plato, Frank Speech, and Democratic Judgment*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008. 21.

true. If a deliberative democracy is, as Markovits puts it, “a logocentric polity,” flattery would have no place, and would be inimical to the speech-centered qualities of democratic legitimacy.<sup>35</sup>

As Markovits puts it in summarizing Habermasian theory, “If the goal of discussion is not consensus, then the endeavor is not ‘communicative,’ but ‘strategic,’ meaning that participants are not treating one another as equals, but as objects to be defeated or won over.”<sup>36</sup> Since the primary aim of flattery is to win people over *by deceiving* them about both facts and the mental state of the speaker, getting them to do what they would not otherwise do, one would be hard pressed to think of a mode of discourse that is *more* strategic – and hence non-communicative – than flattery. We may think of Austin’s account of perlocution:

Saying something will often, or even normally, produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons: and it may be done with the design, intention, or purpose of producing them.<sup>37</sup>

In this instance, the entire perlocutionary point of flattery – that is, the successful practice of flattery – is to persuade its object to do things which he, she, or they would not otherwise do through its conscious arousal of reason-trumping affect.

But it is especially the insincerity of the flatterer that poses a problem for deliberative theories of democracy. If what someone says is insincere, it is hard to see how “the discourse can

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* 21.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* 29.

<sup>37</sup> J.L. Austin. *How to Do Things with Words*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975. 101.

develop in an open and honest manner.”<sup>38</sup> When someone lies – and flatterers are liars, though not all liars are flatterers – we are far from “good deliberative practice.”<sup>39</sup> Habermas is quite explicit about this: “agreement in the communicative practice of everyday life rests simultaneously on intersubjectively shared propositional knowledge, on normative accord, and on mutual trust.”<sup>40</sup> Rawls, too, emphasizes the importance of sincerity in his account of public reason, stating that “A vote can be held on a fundamental question as on any other; and if the question is debated by appeal to political values and citizens vote their sincere opinion, the ideal [of public reason] is sustained.”<sup>41</sup> The goal of speaking is not winning, and the aim is a rationally motivated consensus,<sup>42</sup> which rules out the need for rhetoric in the first place. And a flatterer is a rhetorician, clearly changing the form (and style) of what is said depending on the audience.

The irony, however, is that flattery is a kind of communicative practice that we might expect to occur quite frequently in *democratic* politics. This brings me to the third theme: representation. After all, elites competing for office need, in the end, the votes of citizens, and they may well use language strategically to do so. In addition to trying to get voters to dislike or distrust one’s opponents, candidates – and incumbents – try to get voters to like them. Thus

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<sup>38</sup> Marco R. Steenbergen, André Bächtiger, Markus Spörndli and Jürg Steiner. “Measuring Political Deliberation: A Discourse Quality Index.” *Comparative European Politics*. 2003. 1.21-48. 26.

<sup>39</sup> Robert E. Goodin. “Sequencing Deliberative Moments.” *Acta Politica*. 2005. 40. 182-96. 186.

<sup>40</sup> Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, 136.

<sup>41</sup> John Rawls. *Political Liberalism*. 1996. Columbia University Press. 241.

<sup>42</sup> J. Cohen, “Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy,” in *The Good Polity: Normative Analysis of the State*, ed. A. Hamlin and P. Pettit (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 17-34, 23.

Fenno, in his classic work *Home Style*, describes the “congressman’s *presentation* of self to others,” focusing in particular on the way in which they try to “engender political support” through the verbal and “nonverbal, ‘contextual’ aspects of their presentation.”<sup>43</sup> A key priority is to enhance the sense of trust that constituents have in their representatives, and “to convey one’s honesty to constituents” through “competence, identification, and empathy.”<sup>44</sup> According to Fenno,

every House member conveys a sense of *empathy* with his constituents. Contextually and verbally, he gives them the impression that “I understand your situation and I care about it”; ‘I can put myself in your shoes’; and ‘I can see the world the way you do.’<sup>45</sup>

There are many ways of doing this, and these ways have a good deal to do with one’s constituency – one congressman in particular does this by displaying his love for the ladies: “He greets women with, ‘Hi, Hon.’ When he shakes hands with them, he asks, ‘Can I hold your hand?’ By turns, he flatters and titillates.”<sup>46</sup> Fenno does not hesitate to use the language of manipulation to describe the process.

Jeffrey Tulis describes a similar phenomenon in *The Rhetorical Presidency*, though he seems more overtly concerned with it than Fenno. Indeed, part of his thesis – namely, that the “second constitution, which puts a premium on active and continuous presidential leadership of popular opinion,” and that this constitution is at odds with the understanding of the presidency

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<sup>43</sup> Richard F. Fenno, Jr. *Home Style: House Members in their Districts*. Longman: New York, 2003. 33, 55.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* 58.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* 59.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* 75.

and presidential leadership embodied in the Constitution – involves the danger of demagogues who flatter their audiences.<sup>47</sup> Through the transformation and narrowing of politics by instituting administration, the writers of the Constitution hoped that “demagogues would be deprived of part of their once-powerful arsenal of rhetorical weapons because certain topics would be rendered illegitimate for public discussion.”<sup>48</sup> The presidency, then, was indirectly representative of the people, but “was to be free enough from the daily shifts in public opinion so that he could refine it.”<sup>49</sup> There was much continuity in the practice of presidential rhetoric through Roosevelt; the true change occurred in the Wilson Presidency, during which Wilson’s distinct view of the presidency and the constitution worked in tandem with his understanding of presidential rhetoric, bringing about “a fundamental transformation of American politics.”<sup>50</sup> The end result is that the rhetorical presidency undermines the aspirations of the crafters of the Constitution: “This surfeit of speech by politicians [today] constitutes a decay of political discourse. It replaces discussion structured by the contestability of opinion inherent to issues with a competition to please or manipulate the public.”<sup>51</sup>

## V

We may pause at this point and ask, by way of recapitulation: why is flattery a worrisome political phenomenon? A successful flatterer is morally and politically problematic, at a

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<sup>47</sup> Jeffrey Tulis. *The Rhetorical Presidency*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1987. 28.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* 31.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* 39.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* 173.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* 178-9.

minimum, because the false and insincere praise may cause others to act in ways that they would otherwise not act. And such false and insincere praise may harm those to whom it is applied; at the very least, it will manipulate them into doing what they would not otherwise do. And if we think specifically about the two regimes which, since classical antiquity, have been particularly worrisome for theorists concerned with flattery – democracy and monarchy (or autocracy, more broadly) – we may notice two distinct political concerns. With respect to democracy, flattery poses a threat because, as Shklar remarked in discussing hypocrisy, “those engaged in governing must assume at the very least two roles, one of pursuing policies and another of edifying the governed in order to legitimize these plans.”<sup>52</sup> Part and parcel of democracy as a “logocentric polity” is persuasive speech, and flattery is one mode of dissimulation – among many others – that speakers may use to achieve their purposes, a mode of dissimulation that may be of particular use in democracies, given their ideology of egalitarianism. But flattery may, in a way, be acutely democratic: it’s not hard to see why a speaker might try to butter up her audience, appealing to their vanities, or their sense of self; a common motif in recent American politics is, after all, assuring one’s audience that one is a Washington outsider.<sup>53</sup> The danger for many political theorists when it comes to a democracy – especially those who are skeptical of

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<sup>52</sup> Judith N. Shklar. *Ordinary Vices*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984. 69.

<sup>53</sup> Michelle Bachmann told an audience of Iowans outside of Jubilee Family Church “I am not a politician. I am not an establishment person. I am a real, authentic Iowan.” The author notes, dispassionately, of course, that Bachman has “held the House seat for the Sixth District of Minnesota since 2007.” Susan Saulny. “Embattled but Confident, Bachmann Says She is the Complete Package.” *New York Times*. January 1, 2012.

democracy - is that sweet-talking flatterers will emerge to seduce the people – this is a theme we will encounter in discussing 18<sup>th</sup> century American political thought.

Autocracy, on the other hand, poses a different problem. Rather than the manipulation of the many by the few, the worry with autocracy centers on the manipulation of the one (or the few). Given the sheer amount of power that autocrats possess, it's easy to see why we might worry about them being manipulated by flatterers; indeed, this was a common theme in reflections on monarchy in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, as we will see in discussing Machiavelli and Hobbes. But autocrats themselves have good reason to worry about the flatterers that may be – and likely are – in their midst. A monarch fears flatterers for the same reason he fears hypocrites: “The reason for his mortal fear of being taken in by pretense is that it might threaten his domination over those around him.”<sup>54</sup>

It would be tempting, given its political dangers, to label flattery as a vice, and make this book a story about its dangers and how political theorists have sought to avoid it. Aesop's fable and Andersen's tale pick up on two modes of vicious, or at least harmful, flattery: the cunning flatterer and the fearful flatterer, or what we might label flattery by choice and flattery by dependence. But it is hard not to sympathize with the emperor's courtiers. We all say what we do not mean at least sometimes – perhaps especially if we live in democratic societies, as Shklar argued, or if speaking to those with power over us.<sup>55</sup> Speaking truth to power is never easy, especially when those with power are able to retaliate, a point captured well in this *New Yorker* *Cartoon*.

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<sup>54</sup> Shklar, *Ordinary Vices*, 53.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* 78.



*"I'd like your honest, unbiased and possibly career-ending opinion on something."*

We might, then, expect flattery in instances of power asymmetry. To illustrate this, we may note, albeit briefly, another flatterer who inhabits children's stories: Brer Rabbit. Brer Rabbit engages in subversive flattery, using manipulative kind words to overcome and subvert differences in power. In "Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby," for instance, Brer Rabbit flatters Brer Fox by emphasizing how much power the latter has over him, such that he is utterly at the mercy of Brer Fox, and wants only not to be thrown in the briar patch. Brer Rabbit also flatters Brer Wolf in "Brer Rabbit Gets Caught One More Time," appealing to Brer Wolf's vanity by urging him "to be polite" and say grace before eating him, which allows him to escape.<sup>56</sup> And in "Brer Rabbit and the Little Girl," he flatters Mr. Man's daughter to persuade her to open the garden gate for him, telling her that her father "said he had a daughter who would let me in that field of

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<sup>56</sup> Lester, Julius. *The Tales of Uncle Remus: The Adventures of Brer Rabbit*. Penguin: New York, 2006. 37.

lettuce over yonder, but I sho' didn't expect nobody as pretty as you."<sup>57</sup> In these stories, Brer Rabbit, who is physically weaker than Brer Wolf and Brer Fox, and is literally an outsider when dealing with Little Girl, uses flattery – exaggerating the degree to which Brer Fox has power over him, playing on Brer Wolf's desire to be thought polite, and the little girl's vanity over her physical appearance - in order to negate and overcome differences in power. Brer Rabbit uses flattery in order to manipulate the behavior of another, but does so not simply to get some object of desire or to avoid harm. Instead, the flattery turns power relationships upside down, allowing the physically weak rabbit to trick and trap his more powerful adversaries.

We can hear an echo of this form of flattery in another work of literature. In Ellison's *Invisible Man*, there is a famous episode in which the narrator tells the story of what his grandfather told his father on his deathbed:

Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open.<sup>58</sup>

Overt deference, in this instance, creates a protective barrier that protects the dominated persons who perform flattery, seeming to be straightforward displays of inferiority to those at the top, while serving as a form of empowerment. As Scott remarks, given the asymmetries in coercive and appropriative power that characterize relationships of domination, subordinate groups will

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* 75.

<sup>58</sup> Ralph Ellison. *Invisible Man*. Random House: New York, 1995. 16.

normally engage in public performances that are “shaped to appeal to the expectations of the power.”<sup>59</sup> In private, however – and even in public, at times – subordinates will often speak quite differently than they do in the normal “performance of humility and deference.”<sup>60</sup> When we encounter, then, subordinate groups engaging in apparently deferential performances, we may infer that these acts are intended “to convey the outward impression of conformity with standards sustained by superiors.”<sup>61</sup> What we cannot infer, however, is that they actually accept these standards – or that they reject them. From the perspective of the dominant, deferential acts may seem to be straightforward performances of submission by humble subordinates; from the perspective of the dominated group, it can look “like the artful manipulation of deference and flattery to achieve its own ends.”<sup>62</sup> As far as elites are concerned, these performances typically reinforce their understandings of their status; but it remains just as possible that subordinates are engaging in strategic behavior that “looks upward.”<sup>63</sup> When we encounter deferential or ingratiating behavior – and flattery, regardless of the variety, is overtly deferential and ingratiating – we must be alert to the possibility that those engaged in such behavior do so for reasons that might be quite different than they seem. Indeed, Scott suggests – in an admittedly “crude and global generalization” – that “the greater the disparity in power between dominant

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<sup>59</sup> James C. Scott. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. Yale: New Haven. 1990. 2. It is perhaps for reasons such as these that Cicero was so worried by the phenomenon of flattery, as we will see in discussing *De Amicitia*.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* 11.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* 24.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* 34.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* 93.

and subordinate and the more arbitrarily it is exercised, the more the public transcript of subordinates will take on a stereotyped, ritualistic cast.”<sup>64</sup> Flattery may not simply be vicious behavior; in certain contexts – especially contexts in which there are great power asymmetries and elites have the capacity to engage in arbitrary behavior – flattery may be a strategy deployed by the weak to control the powerful, a performance behind which they try to understand and control the behavior of the powerful. It can be, to borrow a phrase from another of Scott’s works, a weapon of the weak. And we will encounter just such uses of flattery in discussing Castiglione’s *Book of the Courtier*, along with a related use of flattery in Mandeville’s *Enquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue*.

## VI

I close this chapter with a brief outline of the book as a whole. Chapter 2, “Befriending the Emperor: Flattery, Friendship, and the Good Prince in Roman Thought,” begins with a short introductory discussion of flattery in Plato and Aristotle’s thought, paving the way for a sustained discussion of Cicero’s *On Friendship*, with a particular focus on Cicero’s association of flattery with tyranny. Exploring the distinction between tyrants and monarchy in Cicero’s *On the Republic* and *On Duties*, I briefly turn to Tacitus, whose writings abound with flattered and tyrannical rulers. The core of the chapter is a discussion of Pliny’s *Panegyricus*, through which I argue that being able to befriend the emperor – in this case, Trajan – was essential to resolving the tension between monarchy and tyranny, along with navigating the murky social hierarchies that emerged with the transition from Republic to Principate.

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.* 3.

The following chapter – “Speaking without Ornament: Machiavelli’s Plain Style” – begins with a discussion of the topic of flattery in humanistic and Renaissance political thought. I then turn to classical discussions of rhetorical style and ornament, focusing especially on Cicero and Quintilian, after which I argue that the style of Castiglione’s courtier deploys ornament in order to ensnare his prince. Turning to Machiavelli’s *Prince*, and comparing it to Castiglione’s *Book of the Courtier*, I argue that Machiavelli does not avoid rhetoric, per se, but rather a certain style of rhetoric: the grand style. In doing so, Machiavelli’s style – the plain style – is well-adapted to his didactic purposes, and above all the cultivation of prudence.

Chapter 4, “‘The Monarch’s Plague’: Hobbes’s Contingently Unitary Sovereign and the Problem of Flattery,” centers on 17<sup>th</sup> century England. I begin by discussing the place of flattery in late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> century English political thought, honing in on the theme of flattery in criticisms – and defenses – of monarchy prior to and during the English civil wars. I then turn to Hobbes, discussing his essay, “The Life and History of Thucydides,” along with *De Cive*, *Elements*, and *Leviathan*. Synthesizing Hobbes’s skepticism about participatory governments and the dangers of flattering rhetoric, I argue that Hobbes prefers monarchy to non-monarchies because they are contingently unitary. That is, precisely because monarchies – and only monarchies – feature a unity of both the natural person of the sovereign and the artificial person of the sovereign, they are less susceptible to flattery than non-monarchies.

In Chapter 5, “For the Love of Praise: Mandeville and Smith on Praise and Sociability,” I explore Mandeville’s account of flattery’s role in political and cultural development. Drawing on earlier writers, such as La Rochefoucauld and Montaigne, and focusing on Mandeville’s *Fable of the Bees* and *Enquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue*, I highlight Mandeville’s highly original – and highly subversive – account of the place of flattery in maintaining social and political conventions. I then turn to Smith’s writings, though focusing on the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, to explore Smith’s response to Mandeville: by distinguishing between the desire for praise and the desire for being worthy of praise, Smith is able to

develop an account of sociability that maintains a place for self-love without becoming a world of manipulation.

The following chapter, “Good Sense Despises the Adulator,” focuses on American political thought, chiefly the *Federalist Papers* and selected *Anti-Federalist* writings. I first discuss the theme of flattery in 18<sup>th</sup> century American political thought more broadly, particularly as it related to colonial criticisms of the English crown. I then turn to the role played by worries about flattery in both the Constitutional Convention and the *Federalist Papers*. I highlight *Anti-Federalist* concerns that the efforts to dampen the danger of demagogues might impede democratic accountability, briefly turning to Tocqueville’s account of the courtier spirit to explore another dimension of flattery: mass flattery.

Chapter 7 concludes the book, synthesizing and summarizing the arguments of Chapters 2 through 6, while turning to contemporary scholarship on rhetoric, republicanism, and representation. Keeping in mind the possibility that flattery may not always be a bad thing, I suggest that flattery is and ought to be a concern for such scholarship.