Character and Characterization in Ancient Greek Literature: An Introduction

Koen De Temmerman and Evert van Emde Boas*

1 Conceptualization, Questions, Plan of the Book

‘When we think of the works of Tolstoy or George Eliot, we are not remembering Tolstoy and George Eliot, we are remembering Dolly, Kitty, Stiva, Dorothea and Casaubon’. These words by Iris Murdoch (1959: 266) underline the central thematic importance of characters in narrative. Yet for all its importance, ‘character’ is a notoriously slippery concept: the continuing lack of a comprehensive theory of character has during the last few decades become something of a topos in literary theory. Literary character is difficult to define and grasp: it cannot be pinpointed as a delineated, autonomous or homogeneous part of the text, nor can it be reduced to a fixed number of passages.

A study of characterization, then, inevitably raises questions about conceptualization. The topic (or rather, complex of topics) is fraught with terminological and methodological issues, which are compounded in our case by the fact that we are dealing with the literature of a culture at some historical and linguistic remove. The conceptual difficulties involved are such that, for example, Budelmann and Easterling have suggested avoiding the language of character altogether and focusing instead on ‘reading minds’, because ‘this is a language that does not carry the same baggage as the language of “character”. For instance, a focus on reading minds allows us to sidestep questions of consis-

* For insightful comments on earlier versions of this chapter, the authors thank Lars Bernaerts, Julie Van Pelt, the participants of the SAGN 4 workshop in Ghent (January–February 2014), and the members of the Amsterdamse Hellenistenclub (June 2013). The chapter was written partly with the support of the European Research Council Starting Grant Novel Saints (Grant agreement 337344) and the Calleva Research Centre at Magdalen College, Oxford.

1 For similar assessments, see e.g. Brooks and Warren 1959: 171; Hochmann 1985: 7; Glaudes and Reuter 1996: 6–7; Zunshine 2006.

2 See, for example, Frow 2014: vi on literary character as ‘this most inadequately theorized of literary concepts’. Similar observations in, among others, O’Neill 1994: 49; Glaudes and Reuter 1996: 8; Rimmon-Kenan [1983] 2002: 2; Jannidis 2004: 1–7. The complaint, as this catalogue makes clear, is regularly rehearsed, but, as Palmer points out (2004: 37), somewhat overstated given recent work by (e.g.) Margolin, for which, see § 4 below.
tency and development, since “mind”, unlike “character”, does not come with assumptions of permanence’ (2010: 291). Mind-reading (or ‘Theory of Mind’) is indeed a crucial concept in much recent work about literary characterization, and we will engage with this strand of research ourselves below: yet we are not quite ready to give up on ‘character’ as a critical concept altogether. This introduction is concerned with navigating a number of important issues evoked by the language of character, as well as outlining a program for the rest of the book.

We begin with some deceptively basic definitions—fully aware that reducing these terms to single-sentence descriptions is to seriously misrepresent their complexity:

- We define ‘character’ very roughly as the relatively stable moral, mental, social and personal traits which pertain to an individual.
- ‘A character’ (with the article, or plural ‘characters’) is the representation of a human or human-like individual in/ by a (literary) text.
- ‘Characterization’ refers both to the ways in which traits (of all kinds) are ascribed to a character in a text, and to the interpretative processes by which readers of a text form an idea of that character.

As will become clear in the following pages, each of these definitions is rather more inclusive than in some (or even most) other treatments: under ‘character’, for instance, we lump together categories which have usefully been distinguished by Gill (1983: 470–473, 1986, 1990) as ‘character’ and ‘personality’ (see below for this distinction); among ‘characters’, in contrast with some modern definitions, we include representations of historical persons next to mythological and fictional people; and ‘characterization’ we define as the ascription of not only psychological and social traits but also details about outward appear-

---

3 This includes gods (discussed in some chapters in this volume) as well as, for example, the animals in Aesop’s fables (although we shall not be interested in the latter).

4 Throughout this introduction, we will use ‘readers’ as shorthand for readers, spectators, jury members, etc. We deliberately use ‘reader’ instead of ‘narratee’ (for which see SAGN 1: 4–6, de Jong): the distinction is often negligible (not to say forced), but the interpretative processes we are interested in are often to be ascribed to the ‘users’ of texts rather than the (constructed) addressees of narrative communication.

5 For more restrictive definitions of ‘a character’, see e.g. Jannidis 2009: 14 (‘The term ‘character’ is used to refer to participants in storyworlds created by various media ... in contrast to ‘persons’ as individuals in the real world.’) and Eder et al. 2010a: 7 (on characters as fictional analoga to human beings).
ance and physiology, habitual actions, circumstances and relationships, and we include the activity of the reader. In part, our terminological inclusiveness on all these levels mirrors our outlook and approach, which we will motivate below; in part, it is simply a matter of shorthand.

This book is, in some respects, specifically about the third concept, characterization. As befits the series of which it forms a part, we are interested in the **textual devices** used by ancient Greek authors for purposes of characterization, particularly when those devices can be ascribed to a narrator. But given the intractability of the concepts, to investigate the one without the others—that is, to look at characterization techniques without regard for underlying notions of what ‘character’ meant—would seem all too crude. Our aim is not only to describe a series of textual phenomena, but also to investigate the effects of those phenomena and the implications of their use.

Throughout this book, then, we focus on two clusters of questions concerning characterization:

**How?**

- Through the use of which narrative techniques are characteristics or traits ascribed to characters throughout narrative texts?
- Who is responsible for the ascription of those traits, i.e. who characterizes? The primary narrator? A character?
- What are the different effects of the different techniques?

**What?**

- Which characteristics or traits, in the sense of relatively stable or abiding personal qualities, are attributed to characters?
- Which aspects and connotations evoked by the notion of character (such as performance/observability, permanence, given at birth vs. shapeability/external influence, habituation, distinctiveness vs. typification, etc.; see §3 below on all of these) are explored through the attribution of these characteristics?

Following the plan of previous volumes of the *Studies in Ancient Greek Narrative* series, our contributors will evaluate these clusters of questions with regard to individual Greek authors spanning a large historical period and in a variety

---

6 For an example of a restrictive definition see Chatman 1978: 121–138; for a more inclusive definition, see e.g. Jannidis 2009: 21–22. For a survey of definitions of the term in literary theory, see Eder et al. 2010a: 30–32.

7 For narrators, see SAGN 1: 1–4 (de Jong).
of literary genres. This wide range of genres comes with its own complications for the study of characterization, and we will briefly discuss these first (§2), before moving on, in the bulk of this introductory chapter, to contextualize both sets of questions identified above. As for the ‘what’-questions, we will first discuss ancient notions of character and a number of concepts bound up with it in ancient discourse (§3). We subsequently focus on various theoretical approaches to characterization in narrative (§4) and finally, moving on to the ‘how’-questions, we will formulate a narratological model of different techniques of characterization (§5).

2 Genre and the Delineation of Narrative

In dealing with literary characters, there is a need to revisit some of the genre-related issues which were explored in the introduction to the first volume in this series (SAGN 1: 6–9, de Jong). This discussion is prompted in part by seemingly conflicting considerations like the following two—one from the epilogue to SAGN 2, one from the preface to a previous volume on characterization in Greek literature:

[M]ost narratological categories are not bound by genre: the same devices occur in different genres, and genres are not homogeneous where the use of narrative devices is concerned.

SAGN 2: 522, DE JONG

[D]iscussions of practice and principle are … rather genre-dependent …: questions of self-consciousness and identity have for instance tended to be asked more of epic, and in a different sense of the lyric poets; while issues of psychological depth have tended to focus on tragedy, as has that of the relation between art and life …

PELLING 1990a: vi

Character and characterization are, prima facie, topics where de Jong's point about genre-independence may not be wholly applicable, and how much we are dealing with genre-bound factors is an issue which the present volume sets out to explore.

A first issue raised by genre is the fact that, in many cases, we are not even dealing with ‘characters’ according to many modern definitions of the term (§1 above): historiography, biography, and oratory (to list only the most clear-cut cases) all deal with real-life people, which tend to be excluded from the
category. Whether the Greeks would make a similar distinction is a matter for debate, and in any case Greek authors could clearly show an interest in the ‘character’ of such people, and use certain characterizing devices which are also found in, for example, epic and novels. To what extent there is, then, a distinction between the treatment of Greek fictional and historical figures is a question which deserves investigation. If Cohn’s dictum that ‘the minds of imaginary figures can be known in ways that those of real persons cannot’ also holds for Greek literature, this may have significant consequences for the techniques of characterization which narrators could use.

Of course, in Greek literature the division between fictional vs. non-fictional characters needs to be complicated in an important way: several genres feature characters from myth. Like historical persons, such mythological figures come with a set of pre-determined features, which both constrain the ways in which an author can represent them—though Greek authors were clearly interested in testing the limits of such constraints—and automatically steer their interpretation by readers. Mythological characters nearly always (and real-life characters often) are transfactual (i.e., occur in more than one text), and their characterization often hinges on their relationship to predecessors of the same name (the tragic Ajax and Electra spring to mind; the Thucydidean Themistocles may be informed not only by the real Themistocles but also by the Herodotean one).

The topic of characterization also invites a reconsideration of the series’ editorial policy on what ‘counts’ as narrative, or rather, the extent to which the delineation of narrative determines the scope of our investigation. To take drama as an example, even if we agree that there is no primary narrator in plays (see SAGN 1: 8, de Jong), it appears unduly restrictive to focus solely (as was the policy in SAGN 1 and SAGN 2) on the narrative portions ‘proper’ of the texts (i.e. narrative prologues, messenger speeches, choral narratives, etc.). Some of the techniques of characterization employed by (primary) narrators in full-fledged narrative genres are also used to characterize tragic figures (e.g. characterization by action and speech), and a great deal of ‘altero-characterization’ (see below) takes place in non-narrative parts of drama. Moreover, characterization

---

8 Cohn 1999: 118. De Jong argues against Cohn as part of a wider case for the ‘narrativity’ of Greek historiography and biography (SAGN 1: 8–9). But this leaves open, to our mind, the possibility that there will be real qualitative differences between the treatment of fictional and non-fictional characters in Greek literature.

9 For an approach to transfactual characters in modern literature, see e.g. B. Richardson 2010. This kind of relationship between characters across texts could be seen as a very specific type of intertextual comparison, for which see § 5 below.
which *does* occur in the narration of off-stage and past events often interacts in vital ways with the characterization that takes place on stage.

Oratory presents a similar set of problems. Here, too, a great deal of characterization (for instance, of a speaker's opponent) will occur in passages which are not narrative in nature, and characterization that does occur in narrative passages can hardly be taken as unrelated to those non-narrative moments. In addition there are the ways in which the speakers of speeches are characterized by their speaking styles—the *ēthopoiia* for which, for example, Lysias was praised by Dionysius of Halicarnassus,¹⁰ few would argue that Lysias should in such cases be considered a ‘narrator’, and the speakers characters in his ‘narrative’.

Such issues could be multiplied in the genres mentioned and others, and accordingly it seems best to proceed with a fairly tolerant outlook on where certain kinds of characterization can be found to operate. On the other hand, de Jong is justifiably on guard against a policy which ‘dilutes the specificity of narratology and stretches its concepts to such a degree that they become meaningless’ (*SAGN* i: 7). Our line, then, will be to formulate (below, §5) a model of characterization specifically for narrative texts, with respect to the *techniques and methods* used for characterization in narrative, and with an eye to the specific significance for narrative of the question ‘*who characterizes*?’. Taking that model as our point of departure, the extent to which characterization in non-narrative texts can fruitfully be described by it, and conversely, the ways in which it resists such description, may in themselves shed some light on the narrative mode.

3 Ancient Notions of Character

Our modern term ‘character’ derives from the Greek verb *kharassō* (‘to engrave’).¹¹ It etymologically privileges a connotation of distinctive, visible mark that already in Aeschylus and Herodotus is semantically transferred to the realm of moral depiction.¹² When it comes to literary analysis, then, ‘charac-

---

¹¹ Most of the ancient notions of character discussed in this chapter are also addressed (to varying degrees and in different ways) in De Temmerman 2014: 5–14, 18–26.
¹² See Frow 2014: 7 and Worman 2002: 32–33. For a history of the meaning of the term, see Körte 1928. On the common German term for (literary) character, ‘Figur’, which etymologically (*figura*, Lat.) also suggests a shape or form in contrast with a background, see Eder et al. 2010a: 7.
terization' to most modern readers in Western cultures\textsuperscript{13} may imply complex and individualized psychological motifs and peculiar, idiosyncratic characteristics. In such a conception of character, the self is seen as a strictly inner, private and unique locus of awareness, emotion, conscious deliberation and unconscious impulses. But, as scholars of Greek literature have well established over the last few decades, character needs to be approached as culturally determined, and it would be misguided to simply transpose our conceptual vocabulary, with all its implied associations, into the ancient Greek context.\textsuperscript{14} Crucially, no ancient term offers a straightforward equivalent of our modern notion of ‘character’ or of related terms such as ‘individuality’, ‘personality’, ‘self’, or ‘identity’, which are all more or less heavily burdened with modern connotations of idiosyncrasy, singularity, uniqueness, complexity and originality.\textsuperscript{15} The nearest Greek equivalent, \textit{ēthos}, in fact seems to convey none of these, but rather a number of other aspects. In its ancient use the term regularly privileges notions of outward performance and display. As one of Aristotle’s three rhetorical techniques of persuasion, it designates the morally and intellectually positive self-portrayal that an orator constructs in speech in order to enhance his credibility.\textsuperscript{16} In later rhetorical treatises, \textit{ēthos} can designate a specific stylistic category (\textit{idea}) which again implies an appreciation of speech as a performative tool used to display character.\textsuperscript{17} Along these lines, then, character is something to be displayed by the self, particularly through speech, and observed by others.\textsuperscript{18}

\textit{Moral Character}

The character to be displayed and observed was, apparently, evaluated primarily along \textit{ethical} lines. This is what Stephen Halliwell has called ‘the most important fact about Greek conceptions of character’ (1990: 50)—and it is an area where modern and ancient conceptualizations have been seen to fundamentally diverge. Character was assessed mostly in terms of right and wrong: revealed by actions that result from conscious, moral choice (\textit{prohaire-}

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{13} On Greek notions of character aligning more closely with the Hindu than the Western experience, see Pelling 1990c: 248.
\textsuperscript{15} Gill 2006:xiv.
\textsuperscript{16} Arist. \textit{Rh.} 1.2.3–6, 2.1.1–6. See e.g. Patillon 1993: 222–223; Garver 2004: 1–12; Robinson 2006.
\textsuperscript{17} As in Hermog. \textit{Id.} and Ps.-Aristid. \textit{Rh.} On this category: Kennedy 1983: 100; Patillon 1988: 250.
\textsuperscript{18} On performance generally, Goldhill 1999.
\end{footnotesize}
sis), it was taken to essentially conform to or diverge from moral standards, and was described in terms of the possession or lack of aretai (excellences or virtues).19

Along similar lines, Christopher Gill has distinguished ‘character’ (revolving primarily around moral judgement) from ‘personality’ (revolving around understanding an individual’s qualities), and influentially mapped this opposition onto differences between ancient (‘objective’) conceptions of character and modern (‘subjective’) concerns with personality (for which Cartesian philosophy of mind is foundational).20 A related point is that characters and their ethical choices are, according to Gill, typically defined through their conformity to social and/or religious norms and codes. This is what Gill calls the ‘participant’ strand of ancient character (as opposed to the ‘individualist’ strand of modern, Kantian thinking, which regards the ‘I’ as the centre of ethical thought and as a self-determining decision-maker, and which highlights individuality as seen against the social background).21 It is worth noting that Gill’s views have been challenged and moderated by scholars working on a range of authors and genres in Greek literature, typically to show that ancient authors did show an interest in ‘personality’ and psychology,22 even if the resulting portraits are quite different from what we today might expect from individual and psychological introspection. As part of our ‘what’-question, this debate about the moral overtones of character will be re-opened in many of this volume’s chapters, as our contributors assess (variously, we will find) the balance between moral and psychological evaluation, and between judgement and understanding.

**Typification versus Individuation**

As Gill’s distinction between ‘objective-participant’ and ‘subjective-individual’ strands already suggests, the apparently predominant moral connotation of character in antiquity has important implications for the possibility of individuation in characterization. The interest in the ethically exemplary may impede a taste for individual differences: our hankering for the idiosyncratic has rightly been called ‘a strange and recent prejudice’ (Pelling 1990c: 253). This notion is borne out in much of ancient literary criticism, where characters’ behaviour is typically explained not by pointing to unique features of the individual character, but with recourse to commonsensical notions of psychology and typi-
Character and Characterization in Ancient Greek Literature

Character and human behaviour. Similar explanatory models were operative in ancient rhetoric, which first described and later theorized aspects of literary character.

Ancient literature is indeed replete with examples of what Woloch calls ‘compression’ (2003: 69): one outstanding (and often morally relevant) quality is substituted for an entire personality. Examples of such types include Idomeneus’ depictions of the coward (deilos) and the brave man (alkimos) in an ambush in the Iliad (13.276–286), Herodotus’ description of the monarch (3.80), and the claim of Plato’s Ion that he knows ‘what is appropriate for a man to say, for a woman, for a slave, for a free person, for a subject and for a ruler’ (Pl. Ion 540b), and—a particularly significant example—Theophrastus’ exploration of the behaviour of thirty character types in his Characters. Such subsumption of individual character to categories of typical and recognizable behaviour is often realized by conforming characters to pre-existing literary, mythological, historical or socially recognizable (and often morally significant) types. As various contributors in this volume point out, this and other forms of typification are often instrumental in generating authenticity, credibility and persuasion. At the same time, it will be shown that and how forms of individuality nevertheless have a role to play, and that characterization often holds a reasonable middle ground between typification and differentiation—another insight in line with recent scholarship on the topic.

Static and Dynamic Character

Characterization is also a matter of depicting (or not) character over time and thus incorporating (or not) notions of consistency, change and predictability of behaviour. In modern literary theory, the distinction between ‘static’ and ‘dynamic’ character (not changing throughout the story versus changing on one or more levels) has become standard. The ancient evidence on such issues is mixed. On the one hand, scholars have traditionally argued that ancient genres as diverse as oratory, historiography and biography presented character as something fixed, given at birth and unchangeable during life.


See Diggle 2004: 5–9 and Volt 2007: 24–32 for detailed discussion of these (and other) examples.


See, for example, Fuhrer 1989: 69, who calls the notion of Charakterentwicklung anachron-
This conceptualization chimes with the Platonic-Aristotelian notion of stable (adult) character, which is the result of the confluent effects of inborn nature, habituation, and reasoned choice, and therefore relatively permanent.

On the other hand, ancient writers were aware of controversy about the possibility of character change and appear to have been troubled by the question. Plutarch, for example, reports that Theophrastus is undecided (Per. 38.2) about the matter. One regularly suggested alternative to the possibility of character change is the notion of (more or less gradual) character revelation, which assumes that the characteristics of a person have always been there but remain hidden until circumstances provide an external stimulus. Tacitus, for example, states that Tiberius veiled his debaucheries (obectis libidinibus) before he plunged into (prorupit) every wickedness (Ann. 6.51). Plutarch gives a similar explanation in the case of Philip V (Arat. 51.3).

Ancient writers also explore the notion of genuine character change. In Stoic-Epicurean philosophy, for example, formation of character is conceived as the product of a process of perfection, which involves progressive development. And even though the Platonic-Aristotelian conception of adult character is, as we have seen, informed primarily by the notion of stability, the creation of character before adulthood is conceptualized as a process allowing change, as it involves formation, education and the influence of individuals such as parents and teachers, as well as society at large. In literature (particularly biography and historiography), there is frequently the idea that an innate essence (phusis), even if relatively stable, may change, and in any case is not the only ele-
ment to determine character.\textsuperscript{32} Just as in ethical philosophy, character in youth and childhood is assumed to be in the process of formation, and character in adulthood can change as a result of external influences, social factors, chance (\textit{tukhē}) and environmental circumstances.\textsuperscript{33} Plutarch, for instance, argues that Sertorius' cruel treatment of hostages did not expose his earlier mildness as a calculated pose, but was rather an instance of character changed because of adverse circumstances (\textit{Sert.} 10.5–6).\textsuperscript{34}

All these issues themselves presuppose that Greek literature should in its portrayal of character evince a sense of \textit{realistic} consistency (either in stability or explicable change). This seems true of most narrative genres covered in this book, but cannot simply be taken for granted in all of them. Ancient Greek comedy, for instance, regularly seems to work with a poetics that builds character on a logic of \textit{in}consistency.\textsuperscript{35}

Questions of static and dynamic character are addressed in many of the contributions in this volume, together with a number of contingent questions: \textit{how} does one's character change (suddenly or gradually)? Is real character change possible at all, or is character considered to be stable and permanent? How can a change of character be distinguished from a (more superficial) change in behaviour (for example as the result of specific circumstances)? How do narrators address character change as opposed to character \textit{revelation}?

\section{Characters in Modern Literary Criticism}

The topics of character and characterization have given rise to a sprawling debate in literary criticism, and the boundaries between narratology and other subdisciplines of literary theory are (on this issue, at least) not straight-
forwardly drawn. We will, then, in our discussion of modern theoretical approaches to these issues, draw on a fairly wide range of strands. Our focus is, moreover, not only on characterization as a 'property' of texts, but also on the ways in which characters are interpreted by readers: recent work influenced by the cognitive sciences plays a significant role here.

**Actantial, Semiotic, Mimetic and Mixed Approaches**

It has become standard in literary theory to foreground as the central ambiguity of characters their duality between mimetic (or 'person-like') and textual qualities. Nevertheless, much earlier theory emphasized yet another quality of literary characters altogether: their function as narrative agents (i.e. their function of and in a given plot-type). This notion, originating with Aristotle's conception of characters as 'doers' (hoi prattontes, Po. 1449b31; hoi drōntes, 1448a28) was taken as a starting point by formalists, most notably Propp (1968: 25–65), who analyses Russian folk tale characters as acting agencies that drive the plot by fulfilling a number of fundamental functions (hero, helper, adversary, etc.). For Lotman (1977: 352–354), comparably, characters are relevant insofar as they fulfil one of several functions by performing certain, boundary-crossing actions. Like Russian formalists, French structuralists basically reject 'mimetic' approaches to character: for them, character is not (or in any case not in the first place) a semantically invested concept but an element in a narrative syntax that carries forward the action of the plot.

The extent to which these early approaches ignore the representational complexity of characters has sometimes been overstated: the appreciation of such complexity can be found in embryonic form as early as Russian formalism itself. Tomasjevski, for example, distinguishes between a character's func-

---

36 For ancient literary criticism on characterization, see Nünlist 2009: ch. 11.
37 On these two poles ('people' vs. 'words'), see Frow 2014: 25; Eder 2008: 373–425; Rimmon-Kenan [1983] 2002: 31–34; Margolin 1989: 2–5, 2007, 2010. See Heidbrink 2010: 72–79 for an overview of scholarship informed by this duality. A related issue, which we will not discuss here at length but which has attracted considerable attention, is that of ontology, i.e. the question where and how characters exist. For discussion and bibliography, see e.g. Reicher 2010. For the most recent critical overview of theory of character, see Frow 2014: 1–24.
38 Souriau's (1950) conception of character in his discussion of drama texts similarly distinguishes a number of such functions or roles.
tion as a narrative agent and the characteristics of his ‘psyche’, which, he is careful to stipulate, are by no means necessary for the plot progression.\textsuperscript{40} The semantic dimension of character is also touched upon, if only minimally, by French structuralists. In his famous actantial model, Greimas (1967: 225–228) distinguishes not just ‘actants’ (abstract forces operating on a syntagmatic level) but also ‘acteurs’ (semantic units invested with, among other things, social status: father, eldest brother, etc.).\textsuperscript{41} Bremond too, although he regards characters essentially as constituents of narrative roles, claims that the organization of their actions cannot be adequately analysed without making reference to their qualitative features.\textsuperscript{42} Two of the narrative roles that he identifies, for example, that of the ‘influenceur’ (‘informateur’ or ‘incitateur’) and ‘rétributeur’ (‘gratificateur’ or ‘châtieur’), interconnect with issues of motivation and moral evaluation.\textsuperscript{43}

Nevertheless, in the view of much 20th-century criticism, mimetic approaches to character ultimately represent a misguided search for meaning, and critics who approached literary characters as ‘real people’ were a target of ridicule—with L.C. Knights’ essay ‘How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?’ (1933) serving as a popular point of reference.\textsuperscript{44} Yet despite this criticism, the reduction of characters to ‘just words’ proved unsatisfactory to many—rightly, in our view—if only because of the ‘sense that ... fictional characters are uncannily similar to people’ (Martin 1986: 120). In the last few decades of the 20th century, then, ‘mixed’ approaches, which considered characters as a matter both of ‘people’ and of ‘words’, became more prominent. Roland Barthes, though often mentioned in one breath with strictly structuralist theorists, in fact argued for

\textsuperscript{40} ‘Le héros n’est guère nécessaire à la fable. La fable comme système de motifs peut entièrement se passer du héros et de ses traits caractéristiques.’ (1965: 296, our italics). See also Chatman 1972: 58–59.

\textsuperscript{41} See also Queffélec 1991: 239; Punday 1998: 896–897.

\textsuperscript{42} ‘La fonction d’une action ne peut être définie que dans la perspective sous-jacente des intérêts ou des initiatives d’un personnage, qui en est la patient ou l’agent.’ (1973: 132–133; our italics). See also Glaudes and Reuter 1998: 50; Rutten 1978: 76. On Bremond as representative of the structuralist focus on action and narrative progression, on the other hand, see Vlasselaers 1989: 28; Glaudes and Reuter 1998: 41–42.


\textsuperscript{44} An extreme form of opposition to mimetic readings is the post-structuralist denial of any semantic presence of character altogether: cf. e.g. Weinsheimer 1979: 187 on Jane Austen’s Emma: ‘Emma Woodhouse is not a woman nor need be described as if it were’ (our italics). Other examples: Cixous 1974; Hull 1992.
something very much like this by noting that from a critical point of view, it is as wrong to suppress character as it is to take it off the page and turn it into a psychological being (1970: 184). Character and discourse, in his famous \textit{dictum}, are each other’s ‘accomplices’.

Chatman was the first to give such an approach a theoretical underpinning, and made it central to his conceptualization of character (1972, 1978: 127). In his view, character is a ‘vertical assemblage intersecting the syntagmatic chain of events that comprise the plot’; the assemblage consists of ‘personal traits that delineate him, set him apart from the others, make him memorable to us’ (1972: 63). Another significant aspect of Chatman’s approach is the role he carves out for reader interpretation. The vertical assemblage of traits unfolds before the reader in the course of a narrative, thus requiring a continuous process of negotiation, revision and redefinition: the reader acquires new information about the characters throughout his/her reading of the story and accommodates it (or not) against the set of traits established thus far. For Chatman, reader interpretation is situated within the bounds of narrative (a structuralist notion), but at the same time it is an open concept, subject to speculation, enrichment and revision.\footnote{The complexities involved in reader interpretation have been discussed in most detail by Margolin, undoubtedly the most influential recent thinker on character and characterization in literature. In a long series of articles,\footnote{A non-exhaustive list: Margolin 1983, 1986, 1987, 1989a, 1990a, 1990b, 1995a, 1995b, 1996, 2003, 2007.} Margolin both acutely assesses the various textual approaches to characterization, and sets out his own rigorous and comprehensive framework. Margolin’s work combines elements of structuralism, the theory of possible worlds,\footnote{Possible worlds theory has been used by critics particularly with respect to the problematic ontological status of characters. The theory allows scholars to circumvent this problem by postulating that characters in literature are \textit{non-actual} individuals (but individuals nevertheless). For possible worlds theory and literature, see e.g. Ryan 2015: 69–75; for characters as non-actual individuals, see also Palmer 2004.} and (especially in his later articles) reader-response theory and cognitive narratology—an area to which we now turn.}

\footnote{For discussion of the misunderstanding of Barthes, see Goldhill 1990.}

\footnote{On narrative progression as fundamental for the construction of character, see also Phelan 1987, 1989a: 1–23, 26–60, 165–188, 1989b.}
Cognitive Approaches

The ‘cognitive turn’ in narratology of the last two decades has been felt particularly keenly in the study of character and characterization; indeed, some outcomes have been so widely accepted that the author of a recent handbook entry could claim ‘there is now a consensus on some aspects of character in narrative’ (Jannidis 2009: 16). Cognitive narratology investigates the mental processes that readers (and authors) use in their comprehension (and creation) of narrative texts, normally with a basic premise that such processes are fundamentally the same as—if modulated versions of—the ones they use to make sense of the world around them. In the case of literary characters, this amounts to the claim that

the cognitive structures and inferential mechanisms that readers have already developed for real-life people are used in their comprehension of characters. However, an awareness that character stems from a fictional text means that we might modify our interpretative procedures. For example ... we may make particular predictions about a character ... because we assume them to belong to a particular fictional role.

CULPEPER 2001:10–11

Such an approach has immediate consequences for several of the issues treated above, such as the ‘location’ and ontological status of characters, and their relation to real people. In contrast to structuralist or semiotic theories which (in their strictest form) define characters as signs or structures in the text, cognitive approaches assume that characters are representations of (fictional) beings in the minds of readers. More important for our purposes is the point that inferencing about characters is based on readers’ knowledge about the actual world, especially the social world—that there is, in other words, a very fundamental relationship between characters and real people (for discussion of this view, see e.g. Jannidis 2004: 177–184).

---

49 For an overview see e.g. Herman 2013a. Some key publications are Fludernik 1996; Herman 2000, 2003; Eder 2003; Vervaek et al. 2013; Zunshine 2015: chs. 4–9. Attempts to underpin this work with findings from empirical research are growing in number: see e.g. Bortolussi and Dixon 2003, and the journal *Scientific Study of Literature*.

The ‘cognitive structures and inferential mechanisms’ involved in character interpretation are manifold and complex. Two areas of psychology offer particular insight: first, Theory of Mind (ToM, or mind-reading), the basic human capacity (indeed, instinct), developed from early childhood, to attribute mind-states to other people, including mind-states about mind-states (recursive embedding plays a large role in ToM-research). This concept, combined with what Dennett has called the ‘intentional stance’—the tendency to treat even non-human objects as intentional, rational agents (even though they do not have actual intention or agency)—explains readers’ consistent urge to engage with the minds (the inner worlds) of textual characters. Secondly, there is attribution, a central concept in social psychology. Attribution theory deals with the particular kinds of explanation that humans use to explain the behaviour of others and themselves. A basic distinction is that between internal, dispositional attributions (which seek causes for behaviour in an agent’s personality, ability, etc.) and external attributions (which seek those causes in external influences such as situational factors or the compulsion of other actors). Obviously, the dispositional inferences of readers are a critical component in forming a sense of characters’ (relatively stable) traits.

An important aspect of a cognitive approach is that it emphasizes the dynamic nature of characterization: at the first introduction of a character a reader will create a mental model for that character, and subsequently, while using the inferential mechanisms outlined above to ‘read for character’, integrate each successive new piece of character-information into the model. Sometimes this process results in a significant modification of the original model (but not necessarily, see below on flat characters and on primacy); such modifications may, in turn, result in the idea that a character is subject to change, or if a coherent model can no longer be constructed, in the idea that a character is inconsistent.

This integrative process is a mix of top-down and bottom-up processes. Top-down processing involves the activation, triggered by a piece of textual infor-
mation, of knowledge structures (i.e. character schemas, categories, stereotypes, etc.) stored in long-term memory; the activated knowledge structure(s) will then guide further processing as long as possible. Bottom-up processing involves the gradual accumulation in working memory of new information which does not immediately fit into a mental model, until it can be connected with prior knowledge or turned into a schema or category itself. Characterization which is primarily driven by top-down processing tends to result in ‘categorized’ characters (‘flat’ characters, in the traditional terminology of Forster 1927) whereas characterization which involves a great deal of bottom-up processing tend to be more ‘personalized’ (or: ‘round’ characters).

The knowledge that readers use in their processing of literary characters is stored in meaningful memory structures, variously called ‘schemas’, ‘frames’, or ‘scripts’. These are organized clusters of related information which allow people to quickly and economically\(^\text{54}\) make sense of the world around them. Schemas involved in social cognition include those for different personality types, social roles, professions, etc., entailing not only descriptions but also evaluations of behaviour (e.g. as socially acceptable or unacceptable). Such schemas will vary from person to person and society to society, and they are subject to change, although societies and sub-groups within societies will often share certain relatively stable schemas (stereotypes). Just as someone will ascribe the behaviour of others to their character/personality (i.e. attribution) using these categories, so readers will bring them to bear on their comprehension of literary characters if they find that a character’s traits and behaviour agrees with their social schemas. Additionally, readers utilize schemas relating not to the actual social world but to literature: knowledge of genre conventions, stock characters, fictional roles, etc., interacts in various ways with social knowledge in the construction of a character model. Again, such literature-based schemas will vary strongly between (groups of) readers, especially given the fact that readers may come from different literary cultures and may have different levels of literary ‘training’.

What is the upshot of all this for an analysis of characterization in ancient Greek literature? If it can be assumed that the cognitive (mind-reading) processes of a Greek mind were not fundamentally different from those of present-day minds,\(^\text{55}\) the following practical and theoretical conclusions present themselves:

\(^{54}\) The human mind is geared to exerting as little cognitive effort as possible in making sense of the world: see e.g. Sperber and Wilson 1995.

\(^{55}\) This assumption seems reasonable, if only because, as Budelmann and Easterling have shown (2010), we can ‘see’ characters in Greek literature perform exactly the kinds of
Since characterization is a dynamic and integrative process, the order in which and frequency with which character-information is presented is significant. In this regard, the cognitive effect known as **primacy** is of some importance: information about a character which is given early on will strongly determine the mental model of a character formed, and a reader will be willing to abandon or fundamentally modify that model only if presented with information that is significantly (in quantity or quality) inconsistent with it.56

The question whether a certain Greek author, in creating characters, dealt (only) in types or in individualized people with inward depth needs to be problematized in several ways: first, because we are not dealing with a binary opposition but with a scale (depending on the amount of top-down vs. bottom-up processing a particular character elicits); second, because we necessarily use categories and types in our interpretation of real people as much as when interpreting literary characters (this to some extent implodes the distinction).57 That said, it is of course entirely possible that we find different emphases from author to author, genre to genre, and indeed (as § 3 has suggested) culture to culture.58

Overly rigid notions that character is entirely subordinated to plot or rhetoric, in any author or genre,59 are likely to misrepresent the manner in which literary figures are interpreted at least by most readers. Readers will not easily shut off the cognitive processes which impel them to link a character’s behaviour to patterns recognizable from their interaction with real people, even if they are simultaneously aware that they are not actually dealing with

mind-reading processes meant. Note that, given the cultural specificity of schemas, this assumption does not mean that the results of such cognitive processes will have been the same.

56 See e.g. Fludernik 2009: 19. Of course, much depends on the manner and source of the initial presentation of traits (the question ‘who characterizes?’ is highly pertinent here).

57 Indeed, it has been argued that, in spite of their ontological incompleteness, fictional characters are in fact often more accessible to readers than flesh-and-blood people, in part because narrators may allow us to enter upon characters’ inner mental states, something which is not possible in the same way with real people (Cohn 1999; similar arguments in Bortolussi and Dixon 2003: 139–140, and (on Greek tragedy) Easterling 1990: 89–93).

58 For this point made with respect to Greek literature, see e.g. Halliwell 1990: 56–59.

59 Tragedy is central here, and Aristotle obviously looms large, as does ‘Tychoism’ (cf. Goldhill 1990: 11I n. 32). But the type of argument can easily be paralleled in other genres: see e.g. Wilamowitz 1912: 12 and Kirk 1962: 265 on Homer, Jebb 1907: 434 on Thucydides.
real people. Again, it must be added that culturally different conceptions of character may have significant bearing on this issue.60

– An investigation of characterization in Greek literature involves reconstructing the schemas—both social and literary—that would likely have been available to Greek authors and readers (see above on Greek conceptions of character for our evidence for such schemas; of course, much of classical scholarship has been occupied precisely with this kind of reconstructive work).

5 The Construction of Characters by Narrators: Techniques of Characterization

In order to disentangle the web of complicity between characters and discourse (to stick with Barthes’ metaphor cited above), this volume will examine a number of textual techniques adopted by narrators to construct character. We will refer to these as ‘techniques of characterization’. These techniques take their cue from literary semiotics,61 which regard literary characters as ‘signifieds’ (signifiés) to which reference is made by various ‘signifiers’.62

Proper names and pronominal references are among the most obvious of such signifiers, but regularly included as well are descriptions and biographical information.63 Margolin (1986a: 206–208) is even more inclusive and lists as signifiers statements about (1) so-called ‘dynamic mimetic elements’ (i.e. verbal, mental and physical actions of characters), (2) so-called ‘static mimetic elements’ (i.e. a character’s name, appearance, habits and setting), and (3) formal textual patterns (i.e. the presence of contrast, analogy, etc.).

These elements also surface in structuralist and post-structuralist narratology, albeit in different constellations and under different names.64 Most of them, as it happens, were theorized already in antiquity, and we will include some relevant terms from Greek literary theory below.65

60 For a cognitive perspective on such cultural differences, see e.g. Gerrig 2010: 367–369.
63 Hamon 1983: 157 labels the totality of signifiers as ‘l’étiquette du personnage’, which he defines as ‘un ensemble stylistique dont les unités forment l’effet-personnage: nom, prénom, surnoms, titres (appellations), portrait et fiche biographique (description)’.
64 See, for example, Jannidis 2004: 198–207, 219–221 on ‘Figureninformationen’.
65 For a fuller treatment, contextualization of these techniques in ancient narrative literature and further references, both to primary texts and secondary literature, we refer to De Temmerman 2014: 35–41.
A first item that returns in any such typology is the **proper name**. Especially in the case of fictional characters, name-giving can convey information about one’s character. Conversely, the rhetorical trope of **antonomasia** (i.e. the substitution of a proper name by a word or paraphrase) can be equally relevant to characterization.66

Among remaining elements, virtually all systems of classification distinguish between two types of techniques of characterization: **direct** (or explicit) and **indirect** (or implicit) ones.67 Whereas direct techniques characterize through overt evaluations, indirect ones depict characters by registering Margolin’s static or dynamic mimetic elements: what characters do, say or think, what they look like and in which setting(s) they are depicted. Such techniques may be further subdivided into two groups: those operating on the basis of metonymy (i.e. a characteristic is replaced by an attribute related to it by contiguity: speech, action, setting etc.) on the one hand and those operating on the basis of metaphor (i.e. a character is aligned/compared/contrasted with someone or something, either explicitly or implicitly, on the basis of a certain resemblance) on the other.68

The distinction between **metonymical characterization** and **metaphorical characterization** allows us to conceptualize indirect characterization techniques more accurately than is often the case in literary theory. In his chapter on character in the Living Handbook of Narratology, for example, Jannidis (2009) singles out three types of techniques of characterization: (a) textually explicit ascriptions of properties to characters, (b) inferences that can be drawn from textual cues (his example is ‘she smiled nervously’) and (c) inferences based on information which is not associated with the character by the text itself but through reference to historically and culturally variable real-world conventions (he adduces two examples: the appearance of a room, which reveals something about the person living there; and the weather, which expresses the feelings of the protagonist).

This classification is inadequate for two reasons. First, techniques that bear the same, metonymical, relation to character (the act of smiling nervously and the room in which the character appears) are allocated to different categories (b and c). It is of course true that in the example given (‘smiling nervously’), the narrator adds an interpretation (‘textual cue’) to the character's
act of smiling, whereas such interpretation may be absent from an objective description of one's room; but on the other hand, any detail given about such a room will inevitably function as a ‘textual cue’ for the reader just as information about someone’s smile will. And, conversely, there is no reason to assume that reader interpretation of a character’s ‘nervous’ smile is less dependent on ‘variable real-world conventions’ than that of a description of the room in which that character lives (the only difference being that such conventions might in this case be psychologically rather than ‘historically and culturally’ informed).

The second reason why Jannidis’ classification is inadequate is that he also lumps together very different techniques in the same category (c). This is illustrated by his two examples of how setting contributes to characterization: the appearance of a room may characterize a character metonymically insofar as it implies (and appeals to readers’ awareness of) a causal connection between a character and a room that is also operative in real-life inference. In the Iliad, for example, Paris is often depicted in the women’s quarters rather than on the battlefield, which documents his predilection for female company and his problematic ἔθος as a warrior; he prefers to be in a certain place because of his character.69 But of course, the weather can by no means be connected to character in the same way as it implies no such real-life relationship; here, any association (for example, between dark clouds and a character’s dark thoughts) works metaphorically and, unlike metonymical techniques, exclusively on the literary level.

The difference between the two types of settings captures the different interpretative strategies required by metonymical and metaphorical characterization: metaphorical techniques function at the level of literary construction. They are established by explicit or implicit comparison, or by reference to a paradigm: both align a comparandum with a comparans on the basis of a tertium comparationis. Often, such alignments activate intertextual resonances, which in the case of historiography and biography raises crucial issues about the conflation of historical persons with literary models.70 But of course, characters can also be aligned with models taken from broader narrative or mythological cycles or traditions rather than specific intertexts (‘internarrativity’). And finally, metaphorical characterization can also function intratextually: characters are associated with (or dissociated from) other characters within the same work.

69 See also ch. 1 on Homer (→).
70 See De Temmerman 2016 on biography.
Moving on to metonymical characterization, we distinguish seven relevant techniques: emotion, group membership, action, speech, focalization, appearance, and setting (already discussed above). We briefly present each:

1. **Emotions**: in ancient ethics and rhetoric there is a traditional distinction between ἔθη (permanent characteristics) and παθή (emotions, temporary feelings more easily influenced than ἔθος). The emotions displayed by characters and ascribed to characters by narrators can tell us something about their mental qualities or psychological outlook.

2. **Group-membership** anchors characters in their social contexts. Characters can be presented as belonging to a macro-social group (e.g. one’s fatherland, city), a micro-social group (e.g. one’s noble birth, social station, parents, and wealth), and/or an educated-intellectual peer group (e.g. one’s paideia and education).

3. That **action** (praxis) and behaviour are among the most prominent indications of one’s character is an insight widely present in narrative literature and ethical theory alike. This technique will be the subject of extensive discussion throughout this volume.

4. The notion that **speech** indicates character is also very common, and central to the ancient concept of ἔθοποια. In its broadest sense, this term refers to the construction (poiia) of ἔθος in general, i.e. both direct and indirect characterization in all its forms. But in practice, the notion of characterization through speech is usually central: the term can refer, among other things, to an orator’s ability to depict himself in his speech as good and trustworthy and, perhaps most famously, to a rhetorical exercise (progumnasma) that trained students to speak ‘in character’ of a (possibly fictitious) person. One speech device used particularly frequently for the...
purpose of (moral) characterization is the use of maxims (gnōmai, Latin sententiae).

(5) **Focalization** as defined by Bal as the way in which a character views, interprets, visualizes, makes sense of reality can function as a metonymical technique characterizing the focalizer just as speech functions as such a technique characterizing the speaker: the way in which someone sees or interprets events or other persons is often contiguously related to his/her character just as his/her actions or words are.75

(6) **Physical appearance** can act as an indication of character (the central premise of ancient physiognomy,76 which provides a set of instruments geared towards such inference). In narrative, both invariable and variable physical characteristics (body-language) are relevant.

To conclude the chapter, we simply list the various techniques of characterization outlined above:

I. Name-giving and *antonomasia*
II. Direct characterization (*kharaktērismos*)
III. Indirect characterization
   IIIa. Metaphorical characterization: explicit or implicit comparison (*sunkrisis, parabolē*) and paradigm (*paradeigma*); intertextual (e.g. conflation of historical persons with literary models in historiography and biography), ‘internarrative’ and intratextual similarities and contrasts.
   IIIb. Metonymical characterization:
      (1) emotions (*pathē*)
      (2) membership of a specific group (macro-social, micro-social, educative-intellectual)
      (3) action (*praxis*)
      (4) speech (*ēthopoia, gnōmai*)
      (5) focalization
      (6) appearance (guidelines from physiognomy: invariable and variable physical characteristics)
      (7) setting (e.g. Paris in the women’s quarters; setting may also be metaphorically relevant, e.g. dark clouds).

---

76 See Boys-Stones 2007 and Elsner 2007 for introductions. All extant physiognomic treatises are edited by Förster 1893 (and some more recently in Swain 2007).