De Temmerman, K.


This rich, well-written book, the product of a heavy revision of the author’s doctoral thesis, is a study of characterization in the extant Greek novels. To be sure, this is not a new topic, as attested by the voluminous bibliography to which De T. refers, but De T.’s book has claim to originality in that 1) it constitutes a large-scale, systematic study of techniques of characterization in the novels viewed against each other and in comparison with other texts (thus it is broader in scope than Hägg’s *Narrative Technique*,\(^1\) which only focuses on three of the five romances,\(^2\) and at the same time more limited, as it only looks at characterization), and 2) it absorbs the teachings of literary theory, both ancient and modern.

It is indeed the latter that provide the components of the complex theoretical background sketched in the book’s introductory chapter. This chapter has a dual function: to clarify the book’s aims and to introduce the reader to the theoretical concepts and premises on which the main argument (see next paragraph) is based. De T. defines his aims as follows: to explore narrative techniques used by novelists “to semantically invest their characters with characteristics” (pp. 4, 6–7); to study characterization mainly of protagonists and test existing conceptions (typification vs individuation; idealism vs realism; static state vs changeability of characters) (p. 7). The author rightly notes (p. 9) that ‘character’ is not universally defined, but, much like emotions (introduced as a technique of characterization, p. 35), “culturally determined”; hence an

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2 I use the terms ‘novel’ and ‘romance’ interchangeably (see De T. pp. 15–18 for their varied significant load in scholarship).
interpretation of novelistic characters set against contemporary societies as well as literary criticism of their time, is worth pursuing. Concepts such as direct and indirect characterization, metaphor and metonymy (pp. 28 ff.) are rooted in ancient theory and are useful to this day. The section on characterization techniques further demonstrates the novel’s (already familiar) kinship with other literary genres, especially rhetoric and tragedy. As far as modern theory is concerned, the author reaffirms the importance of narratological tools in the study of the ancient novel. He leaves out of his theoretical background the issue of authorial intention (though seemingly relevant at several points, e.g. p. 4 and p. 27). He does engage with reader response theory (p. 27; p. 28 recounts familiar factors that inform reader interpretation). The presentation of the book’s themes and aims (primary and secondary) is elaborately contextualized in the chapter, but readers might have profited from a summary or listing at least of the main points. A list of editions and translations of the novels used by De T. would also have been useful.

The book’s main thesis, as stated in the Introduction, prepares us for a subtle analysis of characters and characterization: “My central argument is that as we move through a narrative text we build up competence in reading character by building databases of associations and becoming aware of axes of differentiation—a process which ultimately leads us to an awareness of the totality of characteristics attributed to a given character”. A main contribution of this book lies admittedly in “adding detail to much previous scholarship” on the issue (p. 208). That having been said, the use of narratological and other theoretical viewpoints leads to numerous new insights into the topic. The book’s five main chapters indeed build successfully on the concepts presented in the Introduction, each discussing characters in an extant novel. This structure is justified by the author’s interest in following character development within each novel (as explained in the Introduction, p. 26).

The chapters on Chariton and Heliodorus are noticeably longer than the rest; this is explained by the particularly complex psychological profiles of the main characters of these novels. The characterization of Callirhoe is rich and insightful; analysis of Homeric exempla is ingenuous (even though not always perfectly convincing). I think, however, that the reader misses a more thorough discussion of the semantics of sophrosyne, whose sense of ‘self-control’ is not limited to the notion of chastity; De T. is of course aware of this (see p. 136, in his chapter on X.Eph.), and might have exploited it in the appreciation of Callirhoe’s character (see Kanavou, N. 2015. A Husband is More Important Than a Child: The Ending of Chariton’s Callirhoe Revisited, available on the Mnemosyne website from April 2015), as it would be in keeping with his argument that the heroine increases her self-control and hence becomes more