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### Character

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### Abstract and Keywords

More recent attempts to recuperate literary character as a legitimate category for critical discussion generally move the discussion in one of three directions. The first attempts to define the concept of 'character' historically, to imagine early modern dramatic persons in relation to 'real' early modern persons as products of intersecting networks of discourse. The second, a form of neo-humanism, argues that there are 'essential' continuities in human experience which permit a direct moral identification between Shakespeare's audiences and his characters. The third can be described as a 'rhetorical' approach to literary character that seeks to define the social operations of language which informed early modern, and now contemporary, receptions of Shakespearean character. This article argues that the rhetorical approach is best suited to new experiences of Shakespearean character made possible in the age of computers.

Keywords: literary character, Shakespearean character, neo-humanism, moral identification, rhetorical approach

IN 1827, the Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge confessed to having a 'smack of Hamlet' in him. In 1853, Mary Cowden Clarke published her three-volume work, *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines*. And in 1997, literary pundit Harold Bloom spent over 700 pages demonstrating that Shakespeare 'invented' the 'human', as we know it.<sup>1</sup> Each of these instances exemplifies an enduring tendency among readers and playgoers to identify Shakespeare's dramatic characters as 'real people' and, in some cases, to identify themselves *with* Shakespeare's literary persons. The intellectual figure most strongly associated with the treatment of Shakespearean plays as a 'little world of persons'<sup>2</sup> was Oxford Professor of Poetry A. C. Bradley, whose influential *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904) represented the culmination of two centuries of Shakespearean character study. Bradley's pronouncements on the heroes of Shakespeare's principal tragedies were popularized widely and for a long time through literary criticism, student editions of the play, and pedagogical guides, so that Bradleyian character criticism became the default

method for teaching Shakespeare's plays. In the second half of the twentieth century, however, literary critics began to scorn what Terence Hawkes has called the 'Hamlet 'n Falstaff "R" Us' school of literary appreciation and its educational ritual, the annual 'character development jamboree' in A-level examinations and their counterparts in other nations.<sup>3</sup>

While L. C. Knights' acerbic question, 'How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?' (1933)<sup>4</sup> was a direct attack on Bradley, it also became a rallying point for later efforts among academic critics to view Shakespeare's plays through interpretive lenses that did (p. 537) not privilege character over other aspects of dramatic production and reception. The attack on character criticism continued unabated through the 1980s, largely through the efforts of New Historicist critics (in the US) and culturalist materialists (in the UK) who claimed Knights, Michel Foucault, and Raymond Williams as forefathers. These anti-character critics generally subscribed to Jonathan Dollimore's credo: 'Materialist theory rejects those ideologies which sustain the belief in an ultimate separation between the political, historical, and social on the one hand, and the subjective and spiritual on the other. In particular it rejects...the humanist belief in a unified, autonomous self.'<sup>5</sup> Construing the self as being shaped and 'contained' by social forces and institutions brought with it a sense that agency, for both literary and historical persons, was constricted. Foucault's dynamic of subversion and containment ultimately means, in Stephen Greenblatt's phrase, that there can be 'subversion, no end of subversion, only not for us'.<sup>6</sup>

Greenblatt used the case of Martin Guerre to argue that in the sixteenth century, personal identity was defined by social roles, not individual personality. People did not grow or develop; rather, they were shaped in response to their place in a complex network of social relations.<sup>7</sup> In the famous case of identity theft evoked by Greenblatt, Martin Guerre went to war and returned a changed man: a better husband, a more tractable partner in the family business, an all-round nicer man. Martin Guerre thus seems to fulfil our expectations for liberal humanist subjects. Eventually, however, the true Martin Guerre, no more pleasant than when he left but now missing a leg, returned home; the usurper of his bed and board, identified as Arnaud du Tilh, was hanged for his offence in front of Martin Guerre's home. The case of Martin Guerre thus becomes a cautionary tale of human limitation on the model of Foucault: there was subversion, no end of subversion of law and social norms, but, in the end, not for Arnaud du Tilh. While Greenblatt's account of the case of Martin Guerre makes a historicist argument, his and other materialists' conception of early modern identity extends as well to the contemporary politics of selfhood. 'We', too, can manoeuvre within social formations and find fissures within dominant ideologies, but never break free from them altogether to exercise free choice and indulge unbridled will. That illusion is what underwrites what Catherine Belsey has disparagingly called the 'liberal humanist subject'.<sup>8</sup>

(p. 538) More recent attempts to recuperate literary character as a legitimate category for critical and theoretical discussion generally take as their point of departure the materialist critique of subjectivity and individualism and move the discussion in one of

three directions. The first attempts to define the concept of 'character' historically, to imagine early modern dramatic persons in relation to 'real' early modern persons as products of intersecting networks of discourse. The second, a form of neo-humanism, argues that there are 'essential' continuities in human experience that permit a direct moral identification between Shakespeare's audiences and his characters. The third can be described as a 'rhetorical' approach to literary character that seeks to define the social operations of language that informed early modern and now contemporary receptions of Shakespearean character. There is a certain degree of overlap among the three approaches, but this chapter will argue that the rhetorical approach is best suited to new experiences of Shakespearean character made possible in the age of computers.

## Recent Approaches to Shakespearean Character

Historicist approaches to character accept as axiomatic the limits on individuality, self-determination, and personal freedom that are the hallmarks of an identity constructed from social roles and institutions. Elizabeth Fowler, for instance, defines characters as 'social persons', literary representations of human beings 'comparable to the representations in other spheres of cultural practice', such as economics, theology, and law.<sup>9</sup> Such persons are not flesh-and-blood people, but 'abstract models' that 'act as a cognitive framework' against which actual people may be measured and judged.<sup>10</sup> Jean-Christophe Agnew, in a compatible argument, looks at the way the concept of personhood develops in accordance with market economies. The English stage, he argues, 'developed narrative and thematic conventions that effectively reproduced the representational strategies and difficulties of the marketplace' and thus gave playgoers a toolkit for coping with social disruptions attendant on the market as an emerging institution.<sup>11</sup> Like Fowler, Agnew sees in this process a tension between the rhetorical simplification of social types in literature and the social complexity, even chaos, engendered by the upheavals in class structure that accompanied the development of market economies.

Neo-humanists, by contrast, push back directly against the materialists' deconstruction of notions of identity and selfhood. Some of these efforts, most notably Harold (p. 539) Bloom's monumental *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*,<sup>12</sup> have been aggressively nostalgic for both the liberal humanist subject and the rituals of character criticism. Following in the footsteps of Bradley and Coleridge before him, Bloom celebrates Shakespeare's grasp of 'human nature' by praising the ability of his characters not only to 'develop' but also self-consciously to 'reconceive' themselves (Bloom, p.xvii). They often attain a level of philosophical wisdom unavailable to most of us (Hamlet being the paradigm here) and are, *pace* Sinfield and his fellow materialists, emphatically 'agents' rather than merely 'effects' of the clashing intellectual 'realizations' that shape their personalities: 'We are convinced of Hamlet's superior reality because Shakespeare has made Hamlet free by making him know the truth, truth too intolerable for us to bear' (p. 7). The possibility of agency, both for literary characters and for 'us', was already implicit in the concept of social persons,<sup>13</sup> but Bloom's humanism requires a religious vocabulary to explain how and why a character such as Falstaff is the 'mortal god' of the critic's 'imaginings' (Bloom, p.xix). Admitting Shakespeare, on the strength of his characterization, to the same intellectual pantheon that Bloom's version of Hamlet inhabits, allows the critic, by rhetorical sleight of hand, to claim for Shakespeare a 'universalism' that is 'global and multicultural' and that relieves Bloom from the necessity of attending not only to historical difference, but also to the differences of race, class, and nationality that have preoccupied post colonial critics.<sup>14</sup>

Another strain of neo-humanism, by contrast, concerns itself directly with literature's ethical function. The work of Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor underwrites one effort to analyse the 'orientation' of different Shakespearean characters toward the 'greatest good' as an ethical ideal.<sup>15</sup> Neo-humanism can address the reception as well as the production of literary character. Michael Bristol, for instance, argues that because some 'essential' features of human experience transcend historical difference, Shakespeare's characters are indeed 'like us' and 'live in a world we can understand. We don't need any specialised historical knowledge to understand Constance or Shylock or Lady Macbeth if we are really alive to our own feelings and capable of empathy with other people.' He concludes: 'Engagement with a character has a moral dimension; it corresponds to the imperative of respect for our human vulnerability to loss and grief. We learn about our own complex character by thinking about and coming to respect Shakespeare's characters.'<sup>16</sup>

The third approach to Shakespearean character, rhetorical criticism, emerged in the 1990s as a response to structuralist explorations of character as narrative function and (p. 540) the post-structuralist dismantling of character along with other narrative elements. Rhetorical approaches to Shakespearean character might be defined as explorations of how characters as rhetorical structures are 'read' on stage and in books through processes of identification,<sup>17</sup> or how 'character effects' are received through structured encounters with cultural discourses.<sup>18</sup> In both cases, rhetorical frameworks, or tropes of character, mediate between producers and audiences, foreclosing the kind of direct emotional identification championed by neo-humanists.

The minor rhetorical form of the Theophrastan Character, which flourished in the Renaissance alongside the medically-driven model of humours characterization, offers a paradigm for how Renaissance characters are mediated through rhetorical screens. Theophrastan Characters generally work by meiosis, a systematic placing of persons into ethical or social groups based on a relentlessly satiric survey of physical characteristics and behaviours. The Character is wedded to an ideology of moral transparency. The types put on display in the genre are grotesque, diseased, smelly, and generally repellent. No one, the narrator's confident tone assures us, would be fooled by such a figure. But the narrative frame in which the portraits are cast suggests a different story. While in collections of such portraits, such as those by Thomas Overbury, Characters can sometimes be flattened into a recitation of traits, in Theophrastus characters generally are portrayed in a social situation. The Flatterer, for instance, pulls loose threads from his patron's coat and praises him loudly in front of others.<sup>19</sup> The narrator of this vignette therefore becomes an observer watching the parasite through the reactions of a chorus rather than participating directly in the social scene. This secondary audience becomes the medium through which these hyperbolically repulsive individuals must be approached. Only through embodied others can character be interpreted, understood, and dealt with. This emphasis on rhetorical structures as embodied mediators between

literary characters and audiences will prove central to Shakespearean character in the computer age.

## Shakespearean Character after Computers

Shakespearean character after the advent of computers looks less familiar and feels less comfortable than it has at any time between the invention of the stylus and film. The digital age offers something very different from what narratologist Mieke Bal tellingly (p. 541) called 'paper persons'.<sup>20</sup> In her discussion of the concept of the post-human, which she sees as the ethos of the computer and information age, N. Katherine Hayles critiques the model of a binary opposition between signifier and signified that has governed our understanding of linguistic signification under the influence of deconstruction, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and other brands of post-structuralism. She imagines instead a 'flickering signification' of meaning that occurs when persons are dissolved into data, then reshaped according to an ongoing dialectic between pattern and randomness through feedback loops that alter both self and environment.<sup>21</sup>

The terms in which Shakespearean character had been discussed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were largely Aristotelian, with 'verisimilitude' and 'consistency' being the hallmark of a credible character. With the novel providing the dominant paradigm, a believable character became one who is, in E. M. Forster's vocabulary, 'round'; a 'flat', two-dimensional figure lacks the qualities necessary to rise to the status of a character, who is an 'individual' and possesses an autonomous self.<sup>22</sup> By contrast, Shakespearean characters in the digital or post-human age are dispersed as packets of data that circulate through the porous membrane between self and environment.

Post-human Shakespearean character might be visualized as a computer-generated word cloud. In the word cloud produced from the complete text of *Twelfth Night*, for instance, various character names are scattered throughout the graphic, illustrating the narratological understanding of character as a 'piling up of data'.<sup>23</sup> Not only are characters reduced to their names,<sup>24</sup> but first names are severed from surnames and proper names placed on equal footing with other words—nouns, adjectives, personal pronouns, and even titles of address (e.g. 'Sir')—while the size of a word depends on its frequency of occurrence. To an uncanny degree, the narratology of this Shakespearean word cloud exhibits the rhetorical operations that Mieke Bal sees as shaping character in narrative: repetition (illustrated by word sizes), accumulation, and relations to other characters (illustrated by the spatial organization of words).<sup>25</sup> In the word cloud, character acquires significance based on this dialectic between pattern and randomness. Is it ironic, for instance, that Olivia and Orsino should find themselves so close to one

another? Is it not allegorically appropriate for Sir Toby's last name to take up so much

'tis act ague cheek aios andrew answer antonio art  
away ay belch boy brother captain cesario count dark dear desire devil dost doth drink  
duke enter excellent exeunt exit eyes fabin fair faith favour fellow  
feste fool gentlemen god host hath heart hold house indeed keep  
knight lady leave letter life lord love mad madam  
malvolio man maria marry master matter mine nature nay niece  
night none nothing officer olivia irsino peace play please pray previous  
priest re-enter reads reason scene sebastien servant sir smile soul  
speak sweet thee thorough think thouthy in toby topical  
viola wit woman youth

graphic real estate?

(p. 542) While a post-human perspective on Shakespearean character as word cloud foregrounds the multiplicity, instability, and widely distributed nature of character, consideration of the computer as a practical tool puts constraints on the free flow of information. Willard McCarty explains the computer as a modelling machine. By the term 'modelling' he means 'the heuristic process of constructing and manipulating models', a model being either a 'representation of something for purposes of study' (what Clifford Geertz called a defining 'model of') or 'a design for realizing something new' (Geertz's 'model for' accomplishing some plan).<sup>26</sup> Models, unlike concepts, therefore have contradictory natures. On the one hand, they must be explicit and consistent; on the other, they are capable of manipulation—rigid and flexible at the same time. Because of the requirements for explicitness and consistency, models sometimes do not work, so that the gap between model and data collapses into aporia, an intellectual dead end. On the other hand, a model always mediates between observer and observed and will function as an embodied actor in that relationship.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the information extracted by any model is in some sense a moving target, and the post-human subject involved with a computer as modelling machine is engaged in a threesome, its relations social but always unsteady and shifting.

The mediated nature of electronic interactions requires an important shift in theories of 'reading' character. Kenneth Burke's explanation of rhetorical identification as a dialectic between identification *of* and identification *with* works well for textual relations with Shakespeare's characters,<sup>28</sup> but imaginatively grounded as it is in Aristotelian rhetoric and public, face-to-face oratory, Burke's paradigm still shares with neo-humanism a confidence that unmediated access to others is possible. A Shakespearean imagining of how identification might work occurs in *Cymbeline*, where the King's rusticated sons, raised in the rough Welsh mountains far from their courtly origins, (p. 543) respond with a direct intensity to the stories their adoptive father tells them about heroic battles of his past:

When on my three-foot stool I sit and tell  
The warlike feats I have done, his spirits fly out

Into my story: say 'Thus mine enemy fell,  
And thus I set my foot on 's neck', even then  
The princely blood flows in his cheek, he sweats,  
Strains his young nerves, and puts himself in posture  
That acts my words.(*Cymbeline* 3.2.89-95)

The vigorous and strongly mimetic quality of the young prince's dramatic re-enactment suggest that he has what Eric Havelock, speaking of ancient epic, called a nearly pathological identification with the storyteller's subject.<sup>29</sup>

With a computer, by contrast, the model can get in the way of mimesis. Or to put it another way, the computer as actor can act up. The embodied nature of electronic relations is important to their success, as has been recognized recently. As Mark B. N. Hansen discusses, the body is crucial, for instance, to human interactions with virtual reality.<sup>30</sup> Theorists of drama, too, are acknowledging that the actor's body mediates between characters and audiences, limiting the actor's agency but opening up a space for audience participation in the assessment of character.<sup>31</sup> In a comparable manner, the rigidity of computer modelling limits agency for a number of participants while enabling others. Take, for instance, the example of a database extracted from texts through mark-up languages in online journals and texts such as those produced by the Internet Shakespeare Editions. The model is flexible; in mark-up languages, the salient items to be marked are determined by the software designer. But the model is also rigid; once the defining set of terms for mark-up is in place, these become the only categories that can be applied to a text. In the case of a tag set for 'genre of Shakespeare play', only those genres identified in advance can be applied to play titles. What happens if the designer forgot a genre? Or if a set of genre tags includes comedy, tragedy, history, romance, Roman play, and problem play, how might a coder identify *Troilus and Cressida*? Ambiguity and multiplicity are not allowed here: only one identification is possible, so that the database's search function for a particular genre will be limited by whichever relevant tag was chosen for *Troilus and Cressida* in any given text. The designer, the coder, the researcher: when using this database, all are limited by the computer's function as a modelling machine. When data is 'unstructured'—raw text, in a manner of speaking—the sheer power of the computer in searching for specific words can also be a hindrance to focused interpretation. In the case of the *Twelfth Night* tag (p. 544) cloud, for instance, proper names are tied not to actions but to a host of small function words, the search engine's hunt for frequency of appearance frustrating rather than satisfying the urge to know what's in a name.



## Four Axioms for a New Rhetoric of Shakespearean Character

The remainder of this chapter will reconsider Shakespearean character in the information age in terms of post-human engagements with computers. It begins with the assumption that literary character is always mediated rather than directly accessible and therefore focuses on its reception as well as its production. The chapter considers the ‘flickering signification’ generated through a dialectic between pattern and randomness. Since the medium is to some extent the message in the latest versions of Shakespearean character, the chapter focuses specifically on two exemplary digital venues: professional applications for exploring Shakespearean texts and YouTube appropriations of Shakespeare. With apologies to Kenneth Burke, the chapter concludes by offering four axioms for a rhetoric of Shakespearean character in the digital age. Often, these axioms engage with one another in a paradoxical relation.

## 1. Character is copious; its master trope is congeries, and its mood is hyperbolic

To some extent, this statement simply gives a new emphasis to realizations about the persistence of the 'Shakespeare effect' by materialist critics. In his retrospective look at character after the theory revolution, Alan Sinfield acknowledges that Shakespearean '*character effects* prove sufficient to prompt character oriented questions', but insists that 'the plays are not organised around character in the modern sense...They effect a sequence of loosely linked glimpses of interiority, not a coherent identity.'<sup>32</sup> While Sinfield finds the 'looseness' of the data for interiority a problem for character criticism, recent critiques of Shakespearean character have tended to embrace that looseness, to dissolve the solid image of a social 'person' that has stood as the imagined object for character analysis into more abstract schemata that are compatible with Hayles's concept of the post-human. Fowler, for instance, speaks of cognitive 'frameworks',<sup>33</sup> Agnew of markets as spatial conglomerations. Both metaphors gesture toward Hayles's notion of a 'distributed cognition' embracing both (p. 545) subjects and their environments in a recursive manner. But under the aegis of the computer, even 'models', 'networks', or 'frameworks' can prove to be metaphorically too iron-clad, too purposive in their import. Digital character is less organised, less intentional, than such metaphors might imply. It is governed instead by a logic of copiousness and is prone to excess.

Superfluity is generally a hallmark of digital text. As Richard Lanham has argued, in an information economy there is no shortage of information; in fact, we are drowning in data. What is in short supply is the human attention needed to sort through and make sense of that data.<sup>34</sup> This is true also of digital character, whose affect I suggest might be conveyed by the classical trope 'congeries'. The term refers to a technique of accumulation, sometimes of ideas but more frequently of words; it carries as well the implication of a copiousness that is chaos barely contained, a piling up of words, images, and clauses that defies logic. Renaissance rhetorician George Puttenham defines such 'heaps' of words in the following way, as 'when we lay on such [a] load and so go to it by heaps; as if we would win the game by multitude of words and speeches, not all of one, but of divers matter and sense.' The example that Puttenham gives is a character portrait that works by accumulation:

To muse in mind how faire, how wise, how good,  
How brave, how free, how courteous, and how true,  
My Lady is doth but inflame my blood.<sup>35</sup>

In Puttenham's example, adjectives of praise for My Lady follow thickly upon one another, contributing to the kind of hyperbole that characterizes the epideictic tradition of praise and blame in classical rhetoric. This 'piling on' of epithets is congeries.

My first example of how the computer manages copiousness in character analysis is Hugh Craig's study of common words as an index to characterization in Shakespeare's plays. While human critics often fasten on salient, often uncommon words as an index to the

subtlety and richness of Shakespeare's language,<sup>36</sup> the computer's capacity for large-scale analysis works best with more humble, unambiguous, 'common' words. Thus, statistical analysis of first-person singular and plural pronouns shows that at one extreme, Warwick (*3 Henry VI*) uses predominantly 'our' and 'we', while at the other Pandarus (*Troilus and Cressida*) uses 'I' in combination with 'not'. While my summary simplifies the wide range of common words 'crunched' by the computer, a generic distinction emerges not only between histories and comedies, but also between characters: Warwick fulfils a 'choric' function, Pandarus an 'interlocutory' one, which (p. 546) Craig sees as in keeping with the generic demands of history and comedy and also with the character typologies belonging to these genres.<sup>37</sup> The visual result of this kind of analysis is a series of graphs placing characters on a grid according to their use of different categories of words. Craig's essay records, for instance, the placement of characters based on the frequency of their use of the fifty most common words, the words based on their use by the fifty largest Shakespeare characters, and characters as identified by gender. There could be no more graphic representation of distributed cognition than this, where characters are divided and replicated according to the computer's 'superhuman capacity to remember and to process systematically' until they become no more than points on a graph.<sup>38</sup> Instead of Bradley's little world of persons, we have an abstract representation of many persons, figured as data clusters distributed over a geometrically defined space.

But despite the computer's capacity for precision, there is a cornucopia of information here, perhaps for some readers even too much information; this tension between the computer's capacity and the receiver's limitations—Lanham's economics of attention—is experienced as well in online Shakespeare editions, where the editor must adjudicate between the urge to provide readers with full information from a variety of critics in the style of a Variorum edition and any given reader's memory and attention span.<sup>39</sup> With a computer's capacities, data is always threatening to get out of control.

My second example of a character congeries comes from the popular YouTube genre of the video mash-up. Usually presented as a movie trailer, the mash-up combines footage from one or more films with a discordant soundtrack from another. One classic example is 'Scary Mary', in which outtakes from *Mary Poppins*, Disney's cheery film about a nanny's magical effect on the family she works for, are paired with the soundtrack from the horror film *An American Haunting*. Nothing from the film is altered; the general effect depends on a precise juxtaposition of selected image and sound that makes Mary Poppins's 'spoonful of sugar' very scary, indeed.<sup>40</sup> In my chosen Shakespearean example, the selection and combination of both visual and aural excerpts becomes much denser. 'Hamlet is Back', a particularly viral form of Shakespearean mash-up, seamlessly combines excerpts from numerous sources to remake introspective Hamlet as Arnold Schwarzenegger.<sup>41</sup> *The Last Action Hero*, in which (p. 547) Schwarzenegger plays Hamlet in a child's fantasy remake of his boring English class, predominates in the video, but the infiltration of other sources, homogenized through a consistently sepia tint and judicious

editing, harmonizes the disjunctive clips to make a James Cameron epic out of Schwarzenegger's *Hamlet*.

This highly sophisticated video trailer not only depends on rhetorical excess for its witty impact, but actually thematizes the conflict between Schwarzenegger's laconic verbal style and the video's visual lavishness, including the excess of its violence. Crumbling towers, looming dragons, and horses gracefully pounding the turf are juxtaposed to 'Hamlet's (or Schwarzenegger's) terse declaration—'Claudius, you killed my fadder....Big mistake'— as our hero hurls his nemesis through a stained-glass window and then strolls through the castle shooting medieval knights off parapets with an automatic weapon. While in the nineteenth century Charles Lamb complained about the absurdity underlying contemporary *Hamlet* productions—that this most introspective of heroes would confess his inmost thoughts to 400 spectators in the Lyceum Theatre<sup>42</sup>—'Hamlet is Back' is baroque, growing ever more elaborate as the video heaps up different hyperbolic snapshots of its hero.

Amateur Shakespeare videos found on YouTube often offer even clearer examples of literary congeries by virtue of the fact that they tend toward wild, improvisatory plots. 'Zombie Hamlet', for instance, starts out squarely in the 'Zombie' genre but then veers off into an entertaining mystery in which Gertrude kills Ophelia with a blow dart. The Zombies make a belated reappearance only at the end as they march in with Fortinbras, presumably to enjoy the Danish spoils in their own ghoulish way.<sup>43</sup> The generic pile-up, robust and exuberant, is hyperbolic and chaotic, exemplifying perfectly the trope of congeries.

## 2. Character is simplified; its master trope is syncope, and its mood is parodic

Although in light of the first axiom, this statement may seem counterintuitive, the drive toward *copia* of Shakespearean character in the digital age is matched by an equally strong move toward simplification. The coexistence of simple moral types in the psychomachia tradition with Bradleyian heroes and Machiavellian villains is endemic to the early modern stage, with the formal Theophrastan Character representing the dynamics by which one can metamorphose into the other. This typology of dramatic character, however, is still couched in the terms of generality and particularity that govern the novelistic distinction between flat and round characters. There is a counter-argument, however, that credible character is achieved by simplification—subtracting details—rather than by accumulation. A suitable analogy might be between literary (p. 548) character and sculpture, where form is created by carving away matter to release the inner form, rather than painting. A rhetoric of character by simplification might be said to work by syncope, a rhetorical term for the removal of letters or syllables from the middle of a word.<sup>44</sup> Lanham offers as examples the substitution of 'heartly' for 'heartily' and 'ignomy' for 'ignominy'. The term can also refer to the reduction of syllables, for instance in the service of regularizing metre, as when Hamlet, speaking to

Horatio about his desire to know what the ghost imparted to him, recommends that Horatio 'O'ermaster't as you may' (*Hamlet* 1.5.144).<sup>45</sup> A related trope is metonymy, which Kenneth Burke defines as transformation by 'reduction'.<sup>46</sup> Another is ellipsis, the elimination of chronological information in a narrative, but syncope expresses best not merely the simplification, but also the material depletion of data in digital character construction.

Creation of meaning by subtraction is typical of computer applications, although not obviously, because such applications are rigid models. Thus, in a simple word search in an online text, one can seek out instances of 'black' and 'white', but not (without other reading methods) 'ivory' and 'coal'. Craig notes as well that statistical study 'begins with a drastic subtraction of all but a very few of the created and perceived materials that make for meaning in drama'. It defines 'a small set of features to count and chooses one limited context [e.g., gender or genre] in which to make comparisons among the results'.<sup>47</sup> The yield of data is rich, but limited by the terms of the original search.

The operations of subtraction or syncope are more obvious in the world of YouTube. This particular social medium works largely by miniaturization, and the constraints placed on users are reinforced by a constant oscillation between immediacy (where the illusion of reality is complete) and hypermediacy (where one is aware of the intervening medium), as defined by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin in *Remediation*.<sup>48</sup> A YouTube page is far from a transparent window on the world. Rather, it is a layered composite of different frames. The actual video is a small screen embedded in a Web page that includes other kinds of information, from the submitter's description and metadata to viewer comments and suggested videos for further viewing. Sometimes even advertising intervenes between the viewer and the video's virtual reality, so that the viewer of a YouTube page moves constantly between looking at and looking through the screen. These visual disruptions, making viewers at times hyper-aware of the medium in which the videos are received, contribute to a generic tendency toward parody, and at the other end of the spectrum, exoticism.

A good example of syncope and the rhetoric of simplification can be found in the emerging genre of Lego Shakespeares, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* being the two most popular subjects. The genre is governed generally by a rhetoric of simplification. On the level of plot, the plays are reduced to one scene, or at most a selection of scenes. A common narrative method is to intersperse animated vignettes featuring Lego figures and stage sets with snippets of text in the style of silent movies, creating in effect a new media version of the collection of Shakespearean 'beauties' popular in the eighteenth century. On the level of technology, these videos work also by stringing together small segments of film in stop-action sequence. As is typical of electronic Shakespeares, aesthetics and technology work hand in glove and are difficult to differentiate from one another; both contribute to syncope, the slicing of existing narrative segments to fit the constraints of technology, online medium, and local genre.

One exemplary Lego *Hamlet*, a nicely produced version of the closet scene, has a stylized setting (castle) and props (blockish wine cups over which Hamlet and Gertrude argue). The principals' physical appearance, of course, is necessarily simplified by the toy's structure: Gertrude, for instance, is identified by her skirt and page-boy hairdo; Hamlet's black clothing and blond bob, reminiscent of both Laurence Olivier's and Kenneth Branagh's appearance in well-known film versions of the play, identify the prince. The focus on particular details in these videos also remediates film. For instance, although Polonius's choice of an arras behind which to hide is textually determined, the expansive pool of blood round his prostrate figure derives from the film tradition. The amount of blood increases from the Olivier to the Franco Zeffirelli films, reaching a level of hyperbolic excess in Branagh's version, so that by the time Branagh's Hamlet is ready to 'lug the guts into the neighbour room' (*Hamlet* 3.4.186), the pool of blood emanating from Polonius's wound has spread almost completely throughout Gertrude's closet, transforming the domestic interior into a gothic charnel house. In 'Lego Hamlet', Hamlet's sword draws out blobs of ketchup, playfully scaling down Branagh's epic *mise en scène* to suit the affordances of amateur film-making and YouTube as a social medium.

### **3. Character works by repetitive form; its dominant trope is exergasia, and its mood is rhapsodic**

YouTube Shakespeare puts little stock in originality. Its producers, by contrast, often note proudly how quickly their videos were put together. The result is a rapid development of genres and sub genres within YouTube Shakespeare. There are not only the ever-growing number of Lego *Hamlets* and *Macbeths*, but also a substantial body of Barbie *Hamlets* and mash-ups consisting of a montage of scenes, taken from Branagh's film, in which Hamlet physically abuses Ophelia, that are set to romantic music celebrating young love from contemporary pop groups. Narratives play off one another, so that Lego creators select scenes used by previous Lego film-makers and riff on their staging; favourite tropes, such as the suburban swimming pool as a site for Ophelia's drowning, emerge.

(p. 550) The classical trope for the repetition of a single idea in many figures is exergasia.<sup>49</sup> Writ large, exergasia produces repetitive form. Kenneth Burke, in his rhetorical lexicon of 'psychology and form', identifies 'repetitive form' as 'the restatement of a theme by new details'.<sup>50</sup> In the case of YouTube, repetitive form is fostered by the application's status as a database, a 'structured collection of data' shaped by mathematical algorithms.<sup>51</sup> YouTube's threading of videos according to metadata recorded by those who upload them, for instance, provides both viewers and potential producers with a handy taxonomy of previous examples that YouTube film-makers clearly rely on when consulting their own personal muses; in many ways, YouTube's function as a database of videos works like handbooks giving formulas for writing romance novels. Paradoxically, this structural approach to Shakespeare can produce new and idiosyncratic character effects, as one video suggesting that Gertrude may have murdered Ophelia, for instance, gives rise to others, the principal variation being in the Queen's chosen instrument for murder. In the database, pieces of characterological 'data' relate to one another paradigmatically, in terms of hierarchical semantic relations; thus, Gertrude is an Ophelia-murderer, a narrative function that does not necessarily tie in neatly with the other roles given to her by Shakespeare. Connections between the video's linear narrative and its dramatic actors on the syntagmatic level are therefore at best episodic, at worst illogical, producing wildly aberrant characterizations. The overall literary effect of repetitive form, as produced through a database, is rhapsodic, each video functioning as a quasi-musical string of events and people that play out in changing combinations.

### **4. Character is appropriation: its master trope is metalepsis, and its mood moves between irony and exoticism**

The dominant ethos of Web 2.0, which includes such social networking sites as YouTube, is appropriation. This aspect of the new media has been met with ambivalence. While Lawrence Lessig celebrates the ability of amateur Web 2.0 authors to appropriate and recombine materials freely in their own art, others have seen this appropriation as nothing more than the theft of others' intellectual property.<sup>52</sup> In either case,

appropriation is very much part of the YouTube ethos. Amateur film-makers take not only ideas, but also pieces of visual and verbal data from one another, which often are applied to new narrative situations that seem to have no logical connection to their source; ease of access seems to be the primary criterion for selection. This is most (p. 551) obvious in mash-ups that take wholesale footage from other videos and either add to or subtract from it, but there are also more isolated examples in which the relation between source and appropriation is notably strained. For example, another Lego *Hamlet* enacts 1.5, Hamlet's confrontation with the Ghost, using music appropriated from the mash-up 'Hamlet is Back'. A soundtrack that in its original context evoked the epic scope of a James Cameron film has now been applied to a miniaturization of Hamlet's encounter with the Ghost, whose low-tech effects put its visuals into an ironic relation with the soundtrack.<sup>53</sup>

In this way, appropriation on YouTube works as metalepsis, the trope by which a present effect is traced to a distant cause, the interim logical connections between them generally having been erased. The relation is not strictly one of substitution, which might more properly be labelled metaphor, for the simple reason that the YouTube database intrudes on any single interaction between video and receivers, who always are being invited to look at related videos. While YouTube videos that respond intentionally to one another create a relatively (or perhaps deceptively) clear relation between source and appropriation, the greater the response to any given video, the more diffuse the artistic genealogy becomes, thus producing metalepsis as a master trope.

Metalepsis characterizes Web-based databases generally, which operate by a logic of what John Unsworth has called 'sampling':

Sampling is the result of selection according to a criterion, really: the criterion could be a search term (in which case the sample that results from selection would be a sample of the frequency with which the thing searched for occurs in the body of material searched). In another case, the criterion might itself be a rate of frequency, for example 'five frames per second', in which case the sample that results would be a series of images sampling the world inside the camera's frame every five seconds.<sup>54</sup>

Within not only YouTube, but also scholarly databases, the selection and isolation of pieces of video, audio, visual, or textual data can strain the already tenuous relations between Shakespearean appropriation or performance and its original context. To give a straightforward example, the Shakespeare in Performance database at the Internet Shakespeare Editions groups its artefacts in terms of subject: one can search for audio, costume design, graphic, flier, etc., although subsidiary links make other searches possible.<sup>55</sup> As is typical of library databases, paradigmatic relations (e.g. moving from one audio clip to another) offer themselves on an equal footing with syntagmatic relations (e.g. viewing all artefacts from one performance). The collected artefacts, furthermore, relate to the performances with which they are associated by the relatively weak trope of metonymy; they are associated with one another, but the online artefact offers only a



miniature (p. 552) excerpt from the whole performance and represents, rather than simply reproduces that performance, placing the copy at a double remove from its original.

Within museum environments such as the Internet Shakespeare Editions, the scholarly apparatus provided by editors underwrites, guides, and perhaps even disciplines the possibilities for interpretation of any given artefact. The more separated the user of such a database is from the context from which the artefacts were extracted, however, the greater the possibility for an audience response that is grounded in exoticism. I use this term in preference to orientalism (which suggests a more coherent ideological position vis-à-vis the other) because the database's ability to deliver data as cultural 'snapshots' is disorienting in an ideological sense, in part because websites lack, to a greater or lesser extent, the surrounding material or paratext that shapes a scholarly response to unfamiliar art. On the scholarly end of the spectrum is MIT's Shakespeare Performance in Asia collection, which houses records of more than 240 performances and adaptations and twenty-two video clips. The second clip, 'I have killed my wife', in which Othello soliloquizes after having killed his Desdemona, comes with the following bibliographical information:

*Clip Title:* I have killed my wife

*Production Title:* Desdemona (Tokyo)

*Description:* Othello confesses to killing Desdemona.

*Shakespeare Reference:* Othello

*Language:* English, Japanese, Burmese, Sanskrit, and Korean

*Tags:* patriarchy and video<sup>56</sup>

All of this metadata helps viewers unfamiliar with the dramatic tradition being recorded in the 2:51 minute clip understand its relation to Shakespeare, despite obvious barriers such as language and performance conventions. Subtitles also prove helpful, indicating that Othello's tragedy is linked to his desire for a son that this marriage presumably has not given him.

Contrast the scholarly apparatus that guides neophyte scholars of Asian Shakespeare on this website to the relative lack of contextual information provided by YouTube. In one clearly parodic, yet uncontextualized clip, a Japanese Hamlet (identified as Tatsuja Fujiwara) is confronted by a ghost that, by Shakespearean standards, seems excessively abject, at the exact moment when, as the video's description tells us, Hamlet in his underwear is 'just about to get it on with a Valkyri'.<sup>57</sup> From the YouTube posting, we can glean that this is a musical, from the video itself can we sense that a comic mood predominates, and from other threaded videos we can see more selections from the musical. But that is all. YouTube uncouples multimedia clips on the Web from their (p. 553) cultural contexts according to the logic of metalepsis, encouraging an attitude of exotic wonder and perhaps intellectual confusion.

## Character

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Perhaps what distinguishes most clearly the production and reception of Shakespearean characters in new media, Web 2.0, and other electronic environments from other current approaches to character is the way in which the mediation of code between receiver and character brackets together the issue of morality in identification. One can respond with a nearly voyeuristic curiosity or with a burst of simple appreciation, the ubiquitous 'lol' of YouTube commentary. Because the medium intervenes always between us and the characters, however, the possibility of moral improvement and a sharing of essential human experiences are precluded.

## Coda

This chapter has sought to explain what happens when Shakespearean plays and their characters are catapulted onto the World Wide Web by a variety of computer applications. It does not argue, however, that either the operations of identification or defamiliarization are restricted to particular media or historical moments. Robert Greene, in disparaging Shakespeare as an 'upstart Crowe', equated him with his historical invention, the character of Margaret of Anjou as witch and national pariah. Charles Whitney has shown as well that early modern audiences identified with dramatic characters, in particular Falstaff and Tamburlaine, in often idiosyncratic ways.<sup>58</sup> In many ways, despite vast differences in technology and medium, Shakespeare's audiences in the age of computers struggle, as his contemporaries did, against the mediated quality of 'Shakespeare' to make their own, equally idiosyncratic identifications with the playwright.

## Notes:

(1) Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lectures and Notes on Shakspeare and other English Poets* (ed.) T. Ashe (London: George Bell and Sons, 1897), 531; Mary Cowden Clarke, *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines*, 3 vols. (London: Bickers and Son, 1880); Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead, 1997).

(2) A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett, n.d.), 42.

(3) Terence Hawkes, 'Bloom with a View', *New Statesman*, 1999, reprinted in Christy Desmet and Robert Sawyer (eds.), *Harold Bloom's Shakespeare* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 29, 27.

(4) L. C. Knights, *How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?* (Cambridge: Minority Press, 1933).

(5) Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology, and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*, 2nd edn. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), pp. xxvii-xxviii.

(6) Stephen Greenblatt, 'Invisible Bullets: Renaissance Authority and Its Subversion, *Henry IV* and *Henry V*', in Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (eds.), *Political*

*Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 45.

(7) Stephen Greenblatt, 'Psychoanalysis and Renaissance Culture', in Patricia Parker and David Quint, (eds.), *Literary Theory / Renaissance Texts* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 210–24.

(8) Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (London and New York: Methuen, 1985), 8 and *passim*. Belsey articulates the position that agency can be redeemed by negotiating interstices in dominant ideologies in 'Constructing the Subject: Deconstructing the Text', in Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (eds.), *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 657–73.

(9) Elizabeth Fowler, *Literary Character: The Human Figure in Early English Writing* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 28.

(10) Elizabeth Fowler, 'Shylock's Virtual Injuries', *Shakespeare Studies* 34 (2006), 59.

(11) Jean-Christophe Agnew, *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550–1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 12.

(12) (New York: Riverhead, 1998). Further citations given parenthetically in the text.

(13) For a theoretical account of agency, see Belsey, 'Constructing the Subject'. A historical study of Renaissance 'agency' can be found in Katherine Rowe, *Dead Hands: Fictions of Agency, Renaissance to Modern* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

(14) See, for instance, Alan Sinfield, 'How to Read *The Merchant of Venice* without Being Heterosexual', in Kate Chedgzoy (ed.), *Shakespeare, Feminism, and Gender* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 115–34; and Fowler, 'Shylock's Virtual Injuries'.

(15) Mustapha Fahmi, 'Man's Chief Good: The Shakespearean Character as Evaluator', *The Shakespearean International Yearbook* 8 (2008), 119–35.

(16) Michael Bristol, 'Confusing Shakespeare's Characters with Real People: Reflections on Reading in Four Questions', in Paul Yachnin and Jessica Slight (eds.), *Shakespeare and Character: Theory, History, Performance, and Theatrical Persons* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 38.

(17) See Christy Desmet, *Reading Shakespeare's Characters* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992).

(18) See Alan Sinfield, 'From Bradley to Cultural Materialism', *Shakespeare Studies* 34 (2006), 25–34.

- (19) *Theophrastus: The Character Sketches*, Warren Anderson (trans.) (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1970), 71. I discuss the Theophrastan Character as a theoretical model in 'The Persistence of Character', *Shakespeare Studies* 34 (2006): 46–55.
- (20) Mieke Bal, *Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 2nd edn. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 116.
- (21) N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 25 and *passim*.
- (22) I discuss the shape of Shakespearean character criticism during those two centuries in *Reading Shakespeare's Characters: Rhetoric, Ethics, and Identity* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), chs. 1 and 2. E. M. Forster outlines his well-known taxonomy of character in *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1927).
- (23) Bal, *Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 125.
- (24) On character as proper name, see Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, Richard Miller (trans.) (New York: Hill and Wang), 131.
- (25) See Bal, *Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 126.
- (26) Willard McCarty, *Humanities Computing* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 24.
- (27) See McCarty, *Humanities Computing*, 38.
- (28) For a discussion of Burkean identification as a model for Shakespearean identification, see Desmet, *Reading Shakespeare's Characters*, 29–33 Identification is discussed in Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1950; rpt. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 19 ff.
- (29) Eric A. Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), 20–35.
- (30) Mark B. N. Hansen, *Bodies in Code: Interfaces with Digital Media* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 2.
- (31) See Andrew James Hartley, 'Character, Agency, and the Familiar Actor', in Paul Yachnin and Jessica Slight (eds.), *Shakespeare and Character: Theory, History, Performance, and Theatrical Persons* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 174.
- (32) Alan Sinfield, 'From Bradley to Cultural Materialism', *Shakespeare Studies*, 34 (2006), 29 (*italics in original*).
- (33) Fowler, 'Shylock's Virtual Injuries', 59.

- (34) Richard A. Lanham, *The Economics of Attention: Style and Substance in the Age of Information* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006).
- (35) George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie* (London: 1589) (Menston: Scolar Press, 1969), 236; Richard A. Lanham, *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*, 2nd edn. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 74.
- (36) Jonathan Hope and Michael Witmore, 'The Very Large Textual Object: A Prosthetic Reading of Shakespeare', *Early Modern Literary Studies* 9.3, Special Issue 12 (2004), paras. 1-36, <http://purl.oclc.org/emls/09-3/hopewhit.htm>.
- (37) Hugh Craig, "'Speak, That I May See Thee': Shakespeare Characters and Common Words", *Shakespeare Survey* 61 (2008), 285. For discussion of human versus computer analysis, see also chs. 1 and 2 of Hugh Craig and Arthur F. Kinney (eds.), *Shakespeare, Computers, and the Mystery of Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1-39.
- (38) See Craig, "'Speak, That I May See Thee"', 282.
- (39) The Internet Shakespeare Editions, whose general editor is Michael Best, offer editors the possibility of *copia* in the online edition that is not afforded by the print edition of their texts (see <http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/index.html>). The problematic of editorial *copia* in the Internet Shakespeare Editions is addressed by Jennifer Forsyth in 'Playing with Wench-like Words: Copia and Surplus in the Internet Shakespeare Edition of *Cymbeline*', *Early Modern Literary Studies* 9.3, Special Issue 12 (2004), paras. 1-27, <http://purl.oclc.org/emls/09-3/forsplay.html>.
- (40) 'Scary Mary', YouTube, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2T5\\_0AGdFic](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2T5_0AGdFic).
- (41) 'Hamlet is Back', YouTube, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=m1j-wvCtzuI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m1j-wvCtzuI).
- (42) Charles Lamb, 'On the Tragedies of Shakespeare', in Jonathan Bates (ed.), *The Romantics on Shakespeare* (London: Penguin, 1992), 115.
- (43) 'Zombie Hamlet', YouTube, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=deXZl8QBBh8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=deXZl8QBBh8).
- (44) Lanham, *Handlist*, 147.
- (45) This example comes from the online dictionary of rhetorical tropes, *Silva Rhetoricae*, <http://humanities.byu.edu/rhetoric/Silva.htm>.
- (46) Kenneth Burke, 'Four Master Tropes', in *A Grammar of Motives* (New York: G. Braziller, 1955), 305-17.
- (47) Craig, "'Speak, That I may See Thee"', 288.
- (48) Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).

(49) Lanham, *Handlist*, 74.

(50) Kenneth Burke, *Counter-statement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1931), 125–7.

(51) Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 218.

(52) The first argument is made by Lawrence Lessig, *Code, and other Laws of Cyberspace, Version 2.0* (New York: Basic Books, 2006); the second by Andrew Keen, *The Cult of the Amateur: How Today's Internet is Killing Our Culture* (New York: Bantam Bell Publishing Group, 2007).

(53) 'Lego Hamlet', YouTube, <http://web.mit.edu/shakespeare/asia/collections/catalogue.html>.

(54) John Unsworth, 'Scholarly Primitives: what methods do humanities researchers have in common, and how might our tools reflect this?', [www3.isrl.illinois.edu/~unsworth/Kings.5-00/primitives.html](http://www3.isrl.illinois.edu/~unsworth/Kings.5-00/primitives.html).

(55) Shakespeare in Performance, Internet Shakespeare Editions, <http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Theater/sip/browse.html>.

(56) Shakespeare Performance in Asia, <http://web.mit.edu/shakespeare/asia/collections/catalogue.html>.

(57) 'Hamlet (Tatsuya Fujiwara) meets his "Ghost Dad"', YouTube, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l\\_xRLAd5CQI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l_xRLAd5CQI).

(58) Charles Whitney, *Early Responses to Renaissance Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

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