

INTRODUCTION

What is fictional character? Despite appearances, the question is not straightforward, and the longer one contemplates it, the more troublesome it becomes. Some answers provide superficial satisfaction: we may say that characters are ‘beings in fictional worlds’, or, ‘representations of human agents’. But such explanations do little more than open windows onto a vast and enduring paradox, because actual human selfhood is not a fiction, while a character’s approximation of it is not, strictly speaking, human. ‘Fiction’ and ‘being’ preclude each other, or at best, mingle like oil and water, because human lives are contingent and variable, while characters’ lives are circumscribed by, and devised for, the plot and duration of the work to which they belong. However much they may seem to develop, they are never imbricated in a process of ‘becoming’; they are always already absolute, perfected. A human may ‘be’, but a character simply ‘is’.¹

The core issue is ontology. While humans are mortal and have consciousness, are capable of self-directed action, corporeally real, and possess private intentional and emotional states – to name just a few features – characters are deathless, infinitely repeatable, ultimately incapable of self-determination, physically insubstantial, and lacking a conscious interior. Yet even these seemingly obvious distinctions become unsteady when subjected to further interrogation, because, in practice, actual human autonomy is not much less circumscribed than a character’s;² because

¹ States (1985a) 87 describes characters as people ‘with the slack of indeterminate being taken up’.

² Smith (2010) 238 cautions against too strict a division between characters’ agency and people’s, because while characters are bound by larger dramatic structures, ‘persons possess (more or less) circumscribed autonomy, agency within limits. We are never wholly autonomous, and we tend to overrate the degree of our autonomy, and especially the autonomy of others.’

our knowledge of each other's private consciousness and intentions is limited to their external manifestation; because characters in movies and plays *do* enjoy a degree of corporeal realness; and because many characters transcend their original fictional contexts to feature in subsequent, supplemental works, and to persist as powerful, changeable presences in their audiences' imaginations. Characters are not people, but their precise degree of non-humanness is difficult to ascertain.³

This book argues for a dual treatment of fictional characters, as imaginative fabrications and as human analogues.⁴ While my immediate focus is Senecan tragedy (on which more anon), my approach to this material rests on the broader belief that all fictional beings comprise both textual and quasi-human aspects. They are formal products of language and structure and, simultaneously, person-like in their modes of existence; this binary is the source of their complexity and fascination, and disregarding half of it means failing to capture the full significance of characters as the most pervasive and enduring of fictional phenomena. Of course, they are at base textual entities, mirages fashioned entirely from language, marks on the page (χαρακτῆρες) that convey the impression of a personality.⁵ Our knowledge of any given character is limited to what the author chooses to tell us. To lift a phrase from T. S. Eliot, it is not only Seneca's *dramatis personae* that have 'no "private life"',⁶ but all fictional beings: they can never be extracted fully from their textual milieu; they lay no claim to an independent, personal mindset; they have no real psychological interior; we cannot follow them home, or backstage, or pursue them beyond the public boundaries of their narratives. In these terms, characters' humanness is an illusion that springs from the coincidence of language, plot structure, and repeated themes. They can be disassembled into these component parts, though most readers and viewers will resist doing so because of the powerful

³ See Eder, Jannidis, and Schneider (2010) 6–17 for the major scholarly views of fictional ontology.

⁴ The term 'human analogue' comes from Smith (1995).

⁵ On χαρακτῆρ's original meaning of 'stamp' or 'engraving', see Worman (2002) 17. On its evolution into contemporary English usage, Williams (2014) [1976] 230 provides a brief but erudite account.

⁶ Eliot (1999) [1927] 70.

illusionary impulses governing their sympathetic enjoyment of the story.

But there is nothing trivial about this sympathetic involvement, for this is where the pendulum of fictional character swings towards the opposite pole, away from pure form and in the direction of mimesis. After all, most fictional people embody human capacities and attitudes to a greater or lesser degree. They speak, act, move, and think in identifiably human ways, albeit ensnared in the skein of representation. Characters are implied people; they are ‘an intensified simplification of human nature’,⁷ and as such, they invite precisely the kinds of inferences that their fictional existence precludes. The illusion of their autonomy, say, or their emotional depth comes not just from the author’s clever manipulation of literary conventions, but also from readers’ willingness to imagine and engage with fictive *personae* as though they were real people. Characters are not independent beings, but they frequently take on ‘lives of their own’ in spin-off works, fan fiction, adaptations, impersonations, and even Wikipedia entries. They have no real psychological interior, but audiences will nevertheless form judgements – quite often conflicting judgements – about their implied personalities. We cannot follow them home, but we may be tempted to supplement their stories by extending them beyond the temporal or spatial bounds imposed by the work in question.⁸ In extreme cases, characters may even become extensions of their authors: Jane Eyre blends into Charlotte Brontë, or, in the eyes of one Flavian playwright, Thyestes blends into Seneca.⁹ An audience’s sense of personal connection is a large part of what activates characters, what makes them memorable, potent, and at the same time, so challenging for literary critics to pin down.

⁷ States (1985a) 91.

⁸ Typically, this takes the form of unwarranted speculation about a character’s motives, or equally unwarranted enquiry into the details of his or her ‘life story’. Vermeule (2010) explores the phenomenon in broad terms. Garton (1972) 6 flags its occurrence in ancient thought, with reference to the kind of naïve speculation satirised in Juvenal *Sat.* 7.233–6.

⁹ The playwright in question is the anonymous author of the *Octavia*, who clearly saw in Seneca’s Thyestes (*Thy.* 421–90) a reflection of Seneca’s own, ill-fated return from exile (*Oct.* 377–436). On the frequent conflation of Jane Eyre with her creator, Charlotte Brontë, see Hughes (2018).

How Senecan drama negotiates this balance between characters as textual constructs and as implied humans is the subject of my present study. Primarily, I have formulated my arguments in response to the intertextual and metapoetic analysis that has dominated anglophone scholarship on Senecan tragedy for decades (and to a great extent, the entire field of Latin literature).¹⁰ To be sure, this approach has produced many valuable insights and deserves praise for deepening our knowledge of Seneca's poetic texture, but its implicitly reflexive view of art does not do justice to the mimetic aspect of Senecan tragedy, its representation of extreme emotional states and formidable expressions of individual will. Granted, figures like Medea and Atreus are the compound products of earlier poetic traditions, and awareness of this background enhances their intellectual and aesthetic appeal, but their most immediate and – arguably – powerful effects stem from their monstrous embodiment of destructive human appetites, that is, from their mimesis of actual human traits, distilled to almost painful intensity and explored within the analogous landscape of fiction. Studying characters – as one of the most ‘human’ elements of this humanistic discipline – seemed to me the best way to supplement intertextual trends and, at the same time, to open new avenues of scholarly discussion.¹¹

One could of course demur that Senecan scholarship also abounds in moral/psychological treatment of the tragedies' *dramatis personae*, chiefly as Stoic-inflected representations of the

¹⁰ Major intertextual studies of Senecan tragedy include Schiesaro (2003) esp. 70–138; Littlewood (2004) 259–301; Seo (2013) 94–121; and Trinacty (2014), as well as (2016) and (2018). The collection of essays in Stöckinger, Winter, and Zanker (2017) relies on predominantly intertextual approaches. Senecan metapoetics and self-reflexivity are often construed more narrowly as metatheatre, which is likewise a major trend in scholarship on the plays. Principal studies include Boyle (1997) 112–37; Schiesaro (2003); Erasmo (2004) 122–39; Littlewood (2004) 172–285; Kirichenko (2013) 17–165.

¹¹ Avenues that have existed for some time in scholarship on Greek tragedy, as witnessed by the debate over formalist/structuralist versus humanist treatments of character, the former side championed by Gould (1978) and Goldhill (1990), and the latter by Easterling (1973) and (1977), though her later work (1990) is more sympathetic to the anti-humanist standpoint. This particular manifestation of a long-standing issue originates with Jones (1962) 11–62, who cautions against applying anachronistic notions of individuality and inwardly realised consciousness to the *dramatis personae* of the classical Athenian stage. See Seidensticker (2008) 333–45 for a summary of both sides.

passions.¹² This is absolutely true, and for such studies, the characters' quasi-humanity is a pre-requisite assumption for their conduct being measured against Stoic ethics. But this approach is likewise limited, in some instances because it does not sufficiently accommodate characters' fictional qualities¹³ and in others, simply because it does not acknowledge its fundamental view of characters as human analogues. The result is a lopsided assessment of Senecan drama and the erection of a hermeneutical hierarchy in which Seneca's prose works (non-fictional and therefore belonging to the 'real world') must be used to elucidate his dramatic compositions (fictional and therefore parasitic upon the 'real world').¹⁴ My investigation, by contrast, envisages a dialogue between the literary and philosophical components of Seneca's oeuvre, a dialogue in which the tragedies highlight ideas and problems latent in the Stoic writings, not just vice versa.¹⁵ A crucial, albeit secondary, consequence of my combining characters' fictional and quasi-human aspects is a contribution to the ongoing project of 'seeing Seneca whole': this approach is a vital means of bridging the moral and poetic works, of uncovering and testing their points of intersection.¹⁶

Given the nature of my aims, I do not pursue a purely formal study of characterisation in Senecan tragedy. This is not about Seneca's 'poetics' or 'rhetoric' of character, although I do consider his techniques of construction when and as the occasion demands. Instead, I focus on how Seneca's characters define themselves (and less often, each other), and how Seneca invites audiences to perceive his *dramatis personae* either as fictional constructs or as implied human personalities or, most often, both at once.

¹² An approach with a long history, and more enduringly popular than intertextual analysis. For anglophone scholarship, see in particular Marti (1945); Poe (1969); Pratt (1983); Gill (1987) and (2006) 421–34; Nussbaum (1994) 439–83. German scholarly treatment of this issue is by far the most prolific; a representative sample includes Gigon (1938); Egermann (1972) [1940]; Knoche (1972) [1941]; Lefèvre (1972) [1969] and (1985).

¹³ Thus, for instance, the work of Marti (1945) and Pratt (1983).

¹⁴ Schiesaro (2009) 222 frames this hierarchy in terms of 'rational' versus 'irrational', but the effect is the same.

¹⁵ An approach pioneered by Braden (1985) 5–62 and elaborated more recently by Bartsch (2006) 255–81 and Star (2012) 23–83.

¹⁶ The main volume is Volk and Williams (2006), though monographs such as Littlewood (2004) and Staley (2010) also make considerable efforts to combine Seneca's tragic and philosophical material.

I concentrate on those elements of identity that permit maximum contact between the categories of ‘character’ and ‘person’, which in the case of Senecan tragedy are: behavioural coherence and self-sameness (Chapter 1); role models and imitative selfhood (Chapter 2); physical appearance (Chapter 3); and the pursuit of autonomy (Chapter 4). Discussion pivots around the term ‘identity’, as a neutral word indicative of human traits but equally applicable to fictional figures, and largely unencumbered by the semantic baggage of terms such as ‘personality’ and ‘selfhood’,¹⁷ though I do use these throughout, as rough synonyms rather than distinct categories, whenever variation is required.

This issue of terminology and its attendant intellectual categories raises additional questions of how, or even whether, Seneca himself defines ‘character’, and whether he distinguishes between its human and fictional manifestations. The latter question is, I hope, answered over the course of this study, as I demonstrate how Seneca judges and fashions characters on the model of human beings and – crucially – vice versa, how he defines human selfhood in aesthetic and representational terms. The former question also receives some treatment, chiefly in Chapter 1, where I explore Stoic theories of *persona* and their bearing on normative behaviour versus individuality, subsidiary to my main point about coherence and self-sameness. Usefully, this Stoic concept of *persona* also encompasses issues of essential versus constructed/acquired character traits, for it undertakes to match innate, largely typified, personal qualities with their appropriate social expression; ideally, one builds upon what one is born with. I hasten to add, though, that this dynamic of individuality and normativity, essentialism and constructedness, is not solely the province of Stoic *persona* theory; rather, it underpins Roman thinking about exemplarity, which I chart in Chapter 2, and Seneca’s quasi-physiognomic, quasi-Stoic treatment of body language, addressed in Chapter 3. In

¹⁷ For definitions of ‘personality’, ‘self’, and ‘personhood’, and their relative applicability to ancient literature, Gill (1996) 1–18 is indispensable. Although I do not fully concur with his ‘object-participant’ model, at least not for Seneca, I do take his views on board, implicitly, in trying not to impose anachronistic concepts on Seneca’s notion of human identity. The topic of selfhood in Seneca came to prominence with Foucault (1986) 39–68 and is now the subject of a major collection of essays in Bartsch and Wray (2009).

sum, this study of Senecan tragedy is not about deriving strict classifications of ‘character’ and ‘person’ from his philosophical works and applying them to the plays (aside from the hermeneutical problems flagged above, such explicit classifications are thin on the ground, which could lead to the erroneous conclusion that Seneca simply wasn’t interested in such topics). Instead, I have set out to uncover where and with what effect Seneca allows these qualities to blend, and how their definition emerges from the evidence rather than being imposed upon it.

This approach has necessitated my focusing on certain Senecan plays at the expense of others. While I cover in depth *Medea*, *Thyestes*, *Troades*, *Hercules*, *Phaedra* and *Oedipus*, I leave *Phoenissae* and *Agamemnon* relatively untouched. My reason for doing so is not their lack of fit with the project. Quite the opposite: both plays’ family entanglements can be approached in terms of genealogical exemplarity (Chapter 2), while the *Agamemnon* also fits within Chapter 4’s discussion of revenge. Their omission from this study is meant purely to avoid unnecessary repetition, but I also hope that they will prove fruitful ground for other scholars. Another – perhaps less fortunate – result of my approach to Senecan tragedy is its minimisation of the plays’ choral passages. Despite the odes’ undeniable relevance to the tragedies’ thematic texture,¹⁸ they elucidate character only in peripheral ways, while the chorus itself claims – at best – a highly circumscribed identity, hence its attendant relegation to the margins of my discussion. As with *Phoenissae* and *Agamemnon*, this omission will, I hope, be supplemented by future scholarship.

A final caveat about the aims of this book: it does not set out to rehabilitate Seneca’s characters as complex or ‘rounded’ representations of human uniqueness.¹⁹ The figures in these tragedies have often been dismissed as one-dimensional, rhetorical, or unrealistic – in sum, the stunted creations of Seneca’s own, presumably, stunted talent for drama. August Wilhelm von Schlegel famously called them ‘neither ideal nor real people, rather gigantic, shapeless marionettes, set in motion now on the

¹⁸ Amply demonstrated by Davis (1989) and (1993).

¹⁹ The concept of the ‘rounded’ character comes from Forster (1927) 43–64. Seo (2013) 5–6 critiques and cautions against its application to fictional beings in Latin literature.

string of unnatural heroism, now on one of equally unnatural passion'.²⁰ T. S. Eliot remarked, 'Seneca's characters all seem to speak with the same voice, and at the top of it; they recite in turn.'²¹ More sympathetic critics likewise acknowledge that mannerism hampers these characters' emotional or personal depth: they 'bounce off each other like billiard balls', declares Gordon Braden; Charles Segal asserts 'Seneca's artificial style makes the problem of the credibility and intelligibility of his characters particularly acute.'²² All of these scholars make a valid point: Seneca's *dramatis personae* do not exhibit the *vraisemblance* prized by writers of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, nor do they share the relative complexity, sophistication, and sensitivity displayed by figures in Greek tragedy. A few critics, with Anthony Boyle in the vanguard, have set out to refute, or at very least readjust, these propositions by claiming that Seneca's characters do in fact possess psychologies of remarkable depth and intricacy.²³ Such refutation is, however, unwarranted, not just because the psychology of Seneca's characters is more stylised than individual, but also because this kind of argument tries to rectify a defect by denying it altogether rather than claiming it as a virtue. Yes, Seneca's characters have a somewhat monodimensional timbre, but that is part of their compelling dramatic power. An emotionally sophisticated Atreus would not be half as absorbing as the single-minded, morally myopic tyrant whom Seneca brings to the stage. If anything, this study celebrates rather than relegates the monotonous intensity of Seneca's tragic characters.

²⁰ Schlegel (1809) reprinted in Lefèvre 1972, 14: 'Ihre Personen sind weder Ideale noch wirkliche Menschen, sondern riesenhafte unförmliche Marionetten, die bald am Draht eines unnatürlichen Heroismus, bald an dem einer ebenso unnatürlichen ... Leidenschaft in Bewegung gesetzt werden.'

²¹ Eliot (1999) [1927] 68.

²² Braden (1970) 19, and Segal (1986) 14. Though dated, Garton (1959) 1–3 remains a useful account of the critical vicissitudes that have beset Seneca's *dramatis personae* as the result of evolving scholarly paradigms.

²³ See in particular Boyle (1997) 15–31. Segal (1986) similarly perceives great psychological depth emerging from Seneca's rhetorical style. Arguments about the characters' psychological *vraisemblance* surface every now and again in Senecan scholarship: their first major articulation in the twentieth century is Herrmann (1924) 488–92.

Theories of Character

The division I have outlined between character as a textual construct and as an implied human is replicated in the scholarship on character as well, most of which divides into two camps: those who treat character as a product of language and structure, and those who view fictional people as mimetic of actual ones.²⁴ Brief review of these theoretical approaches is necessary here, partly in order to situate my own undertaking within this scholarly landscape and to bring more of this particular theoretical discussion into the field of Classics (where it has been largely overlooked), and partly to highlight character's remarkable neglect in twentieth- and early twenty-first-century literary theory. That character is at once the most prominent and the least theorised element of literature is a well-acknowledged fact. Writing in 1978, Seymour Chatman noted with dismay 'how little has been said about the theory of character in literary history and criticism'.²⁵ The situation has hardly changed in the intervening forty years. In 2003, Alex Woloch called character 'so important to narrative praxis but ever more imperilled within literary theory'²⁶ and in 2014, John Frow described it as 'this most inadequately theorised of literary concepts'.²⁷ Such a glaring gap in scholarship lends particular urgency to my present project.

The main reason for this neglect has been the dominance of formalist, structuralist, and post-structuralist views, all of which share in a broad ideology of 'decentring' the individual.²⁸ Adherents of these schools eschew notions of the discrete, bounded, autonomous *ego* in favour of inter- or impersonal forces such as

²⁴ Woloch (2003) 14–18.

²⁵ Chatman (1978) 107.

²⁶ Woloch (2003) 14.

²⁷ Frow (2014) vi, written in echo of Frow (1986) 227: 'the concept of character is perhaps the most problematic and the most undertheorised of the basic categories of narrative theory'. Similar protests have been voiced by Culler (1975) 230, 'character is the major aspect of the novel to which structuralism has paid least attention and been least successful in treating'; Hochman (1985) 13, 'Character has not fared well in our century'; and Rimmon-Kenan (2002) 31, 'the elaboration of a systematic, non-reductive, but also non-impressionistic theory of character remains one of the challenges poetics has not yet met'. Fowler (2003) 3, and Eder, Jannidis, and Schneider (2010) 3–4 similarly acknowledge character's neglect in twentieth-century literary theory.

²⁸ Culler (1975) 230; Rimmon-Kenan (2002) 31–3.

language, discourse, power, and cultural codes. Identity, on this model, comes to be seen as fluid or fragmented, always incomplete and always eluding final definition. Concepts of stable or unified personality, on the other hand, are treated as the illusory, sometimes even regrettable, outcomes of oppressive cultural norms and dominant knowledge systems. While it is understandable and even laudable that such a view dismisses the nineteenth-century ideal of realist, individualised characters capable of transcending their given narratives, still its fondness for abstract models of identity and for downplaying human agency has stark consequences for the discussion and appreciation of fictional character.²⁹ When people themselves are regarded as constantly shifting products of cultural codes, character, too, loses its singularity and becomes merely another interchangeable element of literary (or dramatic/cinematic) conventions. The fragmented person is reflected in fragmented fictional beings. Thus, Hélène Cixous protests that, ‘the ideology underlying [the] fetishisation of ‘character’ is that of an ‘I’ who is a *whole* subject . . . conscious, knowable’, whereas the actual individual is ‘always more than one, diverse, capable of being all those it will at one time be, a group acting together’.³⁰

Consequent to their vision of dispersed subjectivity, twentieth-century theorists concentrate on the technical and compositional elements of fictional character: lexis, signification, action, plot structure. Such components have the attraction of seeming objectively quantifiable,³¹ and also of subsuming characters’ supposedly personal attributes into the practical service of narrative. The character, like the individual, dissolves into systems of signification and spheres of action, and as such, has no more claim on the critic’s, or audience’s attention than any other conventional element of fiction; hence its critical neglect. The most extreme versions

²⁹ Consequences outlined convincingly by Smith (1995) 17–35.

³⁰ Cixous (1974) 385 and 387.

³¹ Besides being a central – albeit often unstated – aim of formalist, structuralist, and post-structuralist schools, the desire to discuss literature in objective, ‘scientific’ terms also motivated adherents of New Criticism, who similarly preferred studying form over character. States (1992) 4 sums up the problem in general: ‘Clearly it is difficult to be scientific, or even analytical, about character, and one suspects that the interest in plot and narrative over character in recent theory has arisen because events are more or less hard and indisputable ‘facts’. It is impossible to say exactly why Hamlet slays Polonius, but no one doubts that he did.’

of this reaction against character's implied individualism go as far as dispensing with personal pronouns on the basis that they ascribe an erroneous impression of human coherence; characters are 'it'.³²

This broad trend towards abstraction originates with the Russian formalists, and in particular, with the work of Boris Tomashevsky and of Vladimir Propp. For Tomashevsky, fictional characters were 'sorts of living supports for the text's various motifs'.³³ A story's protagonist, Tomashevsky maintained, was necessary to the tale only as a compositional means of unifying the work's central themes and of providing 'personified motivation' for the connections between them.³⁴ Propp, too, subordinated characters to the demands of narrative in his taxonomic study of Russian folklore, which classified these traditional stories according to thirty-one categories of plot structure and seven standard roles.³⁵ Though Propp's 1928 monograph, *Morphology of the Russian Folktale*, was more a work of cultural anthropology than a literary manifesto, it went on to exert tremendous influence over critical theories of literature in the mid-twentieth century, in France above all.

The intellectual offspring of Russian formalism was French structuralism. Algirdas Greimas adopted Propp's taxonomy of roles as a universal model for fictional character and used it to develop his own 'actantial' theory of narrative, which correlated plot structure to the grammatical rules governing sentences.³⁶ Greimas was more extreme than either Propp or Tomashevsky in bleaching all the personal colour from fictional *personae*: characters, on his model, were *actants* and *acteurs* that occupied narrative positions equivalent to syntactic elements such as 'subject'

³² To highlight the depersonalising effect of structuralist criticism on literary character, Weisenheimer (1979) 187 attempts just such an analysis of Jane Austen's Emma: 'Emma Woodhouse is not a woman nor need be described as if it were.'

³³ Tomashevsky in Todorov (1966) 293: 'sortes de supports vivants pour les différents motifs'. On the formalist origins of twentieth-century character criticism, see Woloch (2003) 15–16.

³⁴ Tomashevsky in Todorov (1966) 293.

³⁵ Propp's seven roles are as follows: the hero; the false hero; the villain; the helper; the donor; the dispatcher; the sought-for person and her father. Culler (1975) 232–3 provides a succinct explanation of Propp's theory and influence.

³⁶ On Greimas, see Culler (1975) 233–5; Hochman (1985) 23–4; Rimmon-Kenan (2002) 36–7.

and ‘object’. These positions were not the exclusive preserve of characters, either: inanimate objects and abstract concepts could fulfil them equally well. Thus, the fictional *persona* became a noun of which something could be predicated.³⁷

Classifying characters according to narrative function, or grouping them into typologies, is by no means a mistaken enterprise, and depending on the literary genre involved, this model may actually be the most effective. A telling example is Northrop Frye’s codification of comic characters, which remains even now a valuable framework for analysing the stock roles and stock scenarios of *comoedia palliata*.³⁸ But if we apply this theory to, say, the psychologically intricate characters that populate the Victorian novel, then we will inevitably be left with a lot of residue, with details that seem superfluous to the plot and to the character’s immediate function within it. Faced with this obvious gap in structuralist theory, Roland Barthes proposed a more nuanced, semiotic approach to character, which argued for the reader’s role in employing established cultural and literary codes to decipher the connotations of a given character’s traits and from there, to assemble them into the mirage of a personality.³⁹ Essentially thematic in outlook, this theory defines character as the meeting point of normative, culturally embedded assumptions about behaviour and appearance, stabilised by the application of a proper name.⁴⁰ These connotations are never absolute, either, and their shifting, open-ended nature means that readers must engage constantly in the process of formulating characters from the text’s many signifiers. Thus, while Barthes allows for some discussion of characters’ implied human traits, he still presents those traits – and the individuality and agency they imply – as

³⁷ Especially in the work of Todorov, who follows Greimas’ model.

³⁸ Frye (1990) [1957] esp. 43–51. Segal (1987) applies Frye’s framework to Plautine comedy with excellent results. This kind of typological approach to character functions most effectively in the genres of comedy and romance, where characters, in the words of Hochman (1985) 77, ‘are often more coherent, monolithic and stable . . . than the more self-contained and less stylised characters of the novel and of tragedy’.

³⁹ Barthes (1974). Goldhill (1990) 111–14 stresses the benefits of Barthes’ theory in contrast to purely formalist analyses of character.

⁴⁰ Barthes (1974) 67. On the proper name’s pivotal ability to generate the illusion of fictional personhood, see also Docherty (1983) 43–86.

incidental outcomes of supra-personal forces. Here, too, both character and person remain decentred.

These modernist and postmodernist approaches to character have undeniable strengths. They are entirely justified, for instance, in their desire to avoid subjective, impressionistic evaluations of fictional beings, and in their eschewal of abstract psychologising. However, they also exhibit two major weaknesses. First, in their push to reject character's referential qualities (that is, its potential, analogic relationship to something outside the text), many of these theories merely reframe rather than eradicate the role of mimesis, thus unwittingly confirming its importance.⁴¹ If – to furnish a reductive example – characters reflect the disintegration of the human subject, then their dissolution into textual components remains a mimetic event, a mirroring of the world as writers, audience, and critics are presumed to experience it. Such logical inconsistency passes largely unrecognised by many postmodern theorists and cautions against their wholesale renunciation of older, humanist analyses of character, which, despite their many faults (explored below), were at least right in assuming a basic level of analogy between the character and the actual human agent.⁴²

The second weakness is the modernist/postmodernist rejection of character's saliency. If characters are merely plot devices, or configurations of language, or the meeting points of connotative descriptions, then they cannot, at base, be said to differ from the fictional representation of other objects and actions. An approach that treats characters as systems of signification puts them on practically the same symbolic level as anything else – a car, a street, a tree. In the words of Joel Weisenheimer: 'Under the aegis of semiotic criticism, characters lose their privilege, their central status, and their definition.'⁴³ This is a critical problem that

⁴¹ As Smith (1995) 31–5 rightly observes.

⁴² Thus Smith (1995) 35: 'The challenge would be to devise a concept of character which is not an analogue to the person; then we might have a truly non-mimetic theory of character. But to do so would so strongly violate our most basic assumptions about what the notion of character is, and what critical function it performs, that it would not be recognisable as a concept of character.'

⁴³ Weisenheimer (1979) 195. Barthes (1974) 178 warns against this scholarly dissolution of character: 'from a critical point of view . . . it is as wrong to suppress character as it is to take him off the page and turn him into a psychological character (endowed with possible motives): *the character and the discourse are each other's accomplices*'. But

Murray Smith tackles and, to my mind, resolves in a particularly convincing manner, by proposing that characters constitute audiences' major point of entry into fictional worlds, and that what audiences recognise in characters, at the barest level, is an analogue of human agency.⁴⁴ Thus, narrative actions gain meaning *because* we imbue them with intent, and events or bodily states are significant *for* the emotions assumed to underpin them. Fictional works cannot seem to avoid stimulating such inferences, even when they portray characters as constellations of semiotic data.⁴⁵ Of course, one does not have to accept Smith's view, but any treatment of character should accommodate its ongoing and pervasive presence in fiction, a presence that would, surely, be much less enduring if it claimed no more significance than any other fictional component.

Any attempt to resurrect scholarly inquiry into literary character is therefore faced with a need to reformulate or to break away from the critical paradigms that have endured for most of the twentieth century. Since prevailing approaches have, by and large, impoverished academic debates about literary character, they really should be placed aside in favour of new methods. At the same time, such an inquiry must also avoid the ludicrous excesses indulged by earlier eras of character criticism and against which twentieth-century theorists reacted. For if it is insufficient to regard character merely as a textual 'space where forces and events meet',⁴⁶ it is equally insufficient to treat fictional beings independently of their narratives, as though they possess a personal past and a private

Barthes himself engages in at least a mild form of such suppression by making character the product of discourse.

⁴⁴ Smith (1995) 17–20.

⁴⁵ Nabokov's *Real Life of Sebastian Knight* is a good example. Though Sebastian is explicitly presented as a (re)construction of textual information, V.'s – and by extension, the reader's – interest in reconstructing him is powered by the assumption that Sebastian must have had some identifiable wholeness and agency even if it cannot, now, be recovered. Nabokov's Sebastian is striking and unsettling precisely *because* the character upsets assumed categories of behavioural integrity and knowability; if these categories were only a mirage – as some post-structuralist arguments imply – then there would be nothing particularly unusual about Sebastian's portrayal. Smith (1995) 26–7 makes a similar point about the defamiliarising use of two actors in Buñuel's *That Obscure Object of Desire*.

⁴⁶ Culler (1975) 230.

psychology. Characters are not just text, but they are not real people, either.

This deeply mistaken inclination to treat characters as independent entities wholly extractable from their texts informed almost all literary criticism prior to the twentieth century. It peaked in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when critics undertook with great enthusiasm to assemble moral portraits of fictional figures, assessing them in the same way one might inquire into the behaviour of a friend or acquaintance. Maurice Morgann's 1777 *Essay on the Dramatic Character of Falstaff*, for example, contemplates how this character's personal history contributes to his morality; a century later, Mary Cowden Clark produced a book devoted to speculating about the childhoods of Shakespeare's heroines. The chief weaknesses of such enquiries are their over-reliance on subjective judgements and unquantifiable material; their unwillingness to acknowledge the cultural specificity of both identity and characterisation; and their all-too-easy movement beyond the information provided by the text. While none of these critics ever actually argued for characters' *reality*, their approach over-emphasised the character-person analogy, to the point where it disregarded or minimised the role played in character formation by formal and structural requirements, by language and culture, genre, and convention. Such faults have, understandably, received a lot of criticism – perhaps most famously in Lionel Knights' 1933 polemic, 'How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?' – and no serious literary scholar would now presume to make unsubstantiated personal inferences about fictional beings. But the fact that many *consumers* of fiction still make such inferences, and that fiction itself invites them, means that the critic must account for their possibility, namely by acknowledging that characters are constructed according to a human model, albeit one subject to change and revision depending on culture and era.

We have come a long way from Seneca, but this overview forms a crucial background to my methodological aims. My approach in this study proposes to bridge, by combining, the 'antinomies of theory' outlined above.⁴⁷ In other words I recognise fictional figures

⁴⁷ The phrase comes from Woloch (2003) 14.

both as textual entities *and* as implied human beings. This practice concurs with a modest yet growing trend in character criticism, which identifies fictional beings as human analogues shaped, confined, and made intelligible by the conventions of narrative and genre: Baruch Hochman (1985), James Phelan (1989), Murray Smith (1995), Alex Woloch (2003) and John Frow (2014) have all, in their various ways, contributed to my developing a satisfactory theoretical framework for discussion of Seneca's *dramatis personae*. I follow Woloch particularly, in maintaining that fictional characters exist in two simultaneous modes, the representational/mimetic and the structural/textual, and that the chief issue in their analysis is not 'either/or' but how to capture the dialogue between them.⁴⁸ How does characters' fictionality give way to humanness and vice versa? Moreover, as intimated above, I make this choice not for the bland purpose of selecting a third way between two polarities, but because I feel it corresponds to a balance (and tension) within fictional character itself.

For Seneca's *dramatis personae*, this means that their embeddedness within poetic and dramatic traditions, their metatheatrical self-consciousness, the semiology of their bodies, their (openly acknowledged) subordination to the demands of narrative and genre are all, always in dialogue with their implied possession of behaviour traits and intentional states, their implied capacity for perceptual activity and self-impelled action. When Medea proclaims, 'now I am Medea' (*Medea nunc sum*, *Med.* 910), she identifies not only her fulfilment of a pre-scripted dramatic role and attainment of an anticipated fictional ontology, but also her quasi-human ability to fashion her own identity, make and implement decisions about her future, and render herself recognisable to others. The proclamation celebrates her fictional agency as much as it denies it.

If there is an elephant in this room it is the question of what actually constitutes a human. If characters are, as I argue, analogues of human agency, how exactly can this sense of a 'person' be defined without recourse to untenable claims about 'universal human nature'?⁴⁹ One

⁴⁸ Woloch (2003) 17.

⁴⁹ Thus Phelan (1989) 11: 'talk about characters as plausible and possible persons presupposes that we know what a person is. But the nature of the human subject is of course

Introduction

solution is Smith's 'person schema', a heuristic set of characteristics derived from anthropology and open to culturally specific accretions when/as needed; the schema comprises seven components: a discrete human body; perceptual activity; intentional states; emotions; the ability to use/understand natural language; the capacity for self-directed action and self-interpretation; the potential for traits.⁵⁰ Smith stresses that these basic requirements are merely a conceptual framework employed to interpret fictional situations by audiences and critics alike; they are by no means a totality, but a foundation that can be adjusted to meet the specific demands of any given context. To some extent, my study of Seneca employs these characteristics as a measure of 'humanness', but in fuller attempt to avoid unwarranted generalisations, I relate the 'humanness' of Seneca's characters primarily to the models of behaviour found in Seneca's own work, and in his contemporary Roman culture. At base, I assess Seneca as much as possible on his own terms.

Identities on Stage

Although in almost all respects diverse and conflicting, the theories discussed in the preceding section have one thing in common: they were developed for and pertain to narrative literature, principally the novel. The question of character has received more attention in this field than in any other, and with good reason, because the novel's form combined with the relative intimacy of its delivery grants authors more scope in the creation of implied human complexity. Even in Classics, where narrative literature is less prevalent than its modern counterpart, the recent (and exciting) upsurge of interest in literary character clusters around either the ancient novel (e.g. De Temmerman 2014) or Homeric epic (e.g. Kozak 2016), a genre that has long proved itself amenable to narratological analysis.⁵¹

a highly contested issue among contemporary thinkers.' See also Goldhill (1990) 100–5 on the dangers of character criticism disregarding cultural embeddedness.

⁵⁰ Smith (1995) 21.

⁵¹ De Temmerman (2014) employs an explicitly narratological approach. Kozak (2016) is more implicit, examining the *Iliad* as a 'serial narrative' that comprises episodes, arcs, and development on the analogy of TV serials.

Introduction

Drama, on the other hand, is a different beast and requires a slightly different approach. Notably, the character–person dynamic assumes new urgency when transferred to the stage, where the fictional presence of *dramatis personae* is also a tangible presence, generated by the real voices, bodies, and *being* of actors. If a character in a novel or a long narrative poem demonstrates mimetic affinities with human behaviour, or thoughts, or appearance, those affinities only grow tighter and more complex in the context of the theatre. Naturally, most audience members receive plays with the same kind of ‘double vision’ they exercise for all works of fiction; they accept the illusion without surrendering to it entirely. Medea is not *really* killing her children; a person embodying Iago is only *pretending* to plot Othello’s downfall. But stories of mistaken audience responses always circulate – from the anecdote about pregnant women suffering miscarriages at the sight of Aeschylus’ *Furies* (*Vita* 9) to the tale of a Canadian prairie farmer shooting Iago at the tragedy’s climax⁵² – and they raise a wry smile not just at individual gullibility, but at the ontological confusion underpinning all theatrical events. Theatre is both real and not real; the actor both is and is not who he/she purports to be.⁵³ Michael Goldman sums up the problem in particularly perceptive terms:⁵⁴

The type of self to which we pay most attention in the theatre – the ‘character’ presented by the actor – could be said to have unique ontological status. It is not the personal self of the actor, but the self he creates by acting. And in that creation the gap between self and deed seems curiously to vanish. A character in the theatre, the created self, is identical with the actor’s deed.

A dramatic character’s whole existence depends upon action, not only in the sense that an unfolding of events reveals a character’s nature (which happens in novels as well) but also in the more fundamental sense that drama implies praxis. Stage characters owe their being to the performance of deeds, whether substantial, as in a sword fight, or unobtrusive, even static, as in sitting on a chair.

⁵² Reported in Garton (1972) 27.

⁵³ For further discussion of this phenomenon, see Worthen (1984) 3 and Bexley (2017) 173.

⁵⁴ Goldman (1985) 10.

The performer's movement, gestures, expressions, and voice are the chief means by which audiences translate him or her into a *dramatis persona*, mainly by inferring an underlying identity that unifies and gives meaning to these snapshots of behaviour. Thus, a lot of activity pursued on stage is simultaneously the character's and the actor's. Although there is an obvious gulf between killing and pretending to kill, in the case of simpler actions such as standing, walking, talking, these lines converge entirely: the character and the person behind the character are doing exactly the same thing. Hence character assumes an additional layer of human resemblance.⁵⁵

It could be argued that this performative aspect of drama is difficult to measure and consequently too speculative to warrant inclusion in my study of dramatic character. Certainly, we cannot ascertain how specific audiences feel or felt about the 'reality' of the *personae* enacted before them, nor should we assume that an audience reacts as a coherent unit. The problem grows particularly acute in the case of Senecan tragedy, because there is no firm evidence that these plays were ever staged during Seneca's lifetime, and because scholars disagree over whether he intended them for performance, recitation, excerpting, or any combination of the three.⁵⁶ If Seneca only ever meant his tragedies to be read, then why concern ourselves with performance criticism as opposed to literary interpretation? I do not wish to revisit this longstanding debate here, and I am, in any case, agnostic on the question of staging: Seneca's plays *can* be performed (and are,

⁵⁵ Storm (2016) 2. Similarly, Bordwell, cited in Eder, Jannidis, and Schneider (2010) 23: 'It is particularly in the cinema that a character has 'a palpable autonomy, that seems to make action subordinate to his/her prior existence', and a similar statement can of course be made for theatre.'

⁵⁶ Such a long-lived debate has spawned many variations, of which I summarise merely the main, most influential examples. In favour of recitation: Boissier (1861); Eliot (1999) [1927]; Beare (1945); Zwierlein (1966); Fantham (1982); Goldberg (1996) and (2000); Mayer (2002). In favour of performance: Herrmann (1924); Bieber (1954); Fortey and Glucker (1975); Braun (1982); Sutton (1986); Boyle (1997); Davis (2003); Kohn (2013). A significant subdivision of the 'performance' approach is the idea that Seneca's plays were designed to fit – or to be adapted to – the genre of pantomime dance: see Zimmerman (1990); Zanobi (2008) and (2014); and Slaney (2013). On scholars' tendency to overestimate the dichotomy between categories of 'performance' and 'recitation', see Harrison (2000) 138, and Bexley (2015).

frequently),⁵⁷ and there is nothing in them that irremediably contravenes the conventions and technical capacities of the early imperial Roman theatre. While valuable up to a point, the debate too often diverts attention away from the plays themselves. It also creates too stark a choice between theatrical and poetic techniques or effects, as though an unperformed play could be treated only as poetry and not as drama. This is where scholarly appreciation of Seneca most often stumbles. For even if we take the minimalist position that these dramas were neither performed in ancient Rome nor intended for performance, we still cannot deny that they were written *as dramas*, that they belong to the genre of tragedy and hence, that they deserve to be discussed in theatrical as well as literary terms. In other words, a certain theoretical appreciation of the dramatic event, like the notion of enacted character that I have sketched above, may profitably be applied to Seneca's work, not just for the purpose of enriching scholarly knowledge, but also to pay Seneca his dues as a playwright. Regardless of their actual staging, these tragedies – and Seneca's writing in general – demonstrate keen awareness of the actor's art, its ambiguities and its power. Seneca perceives theatre as a vital model for thinking through issues of identity, selfhood, and action.⁵⁸ It stands to reason, therefore, that theories of dramatic enactment can be used in return to elucidate Seneca's work, so long as they are used with an adequate degree of caution.

Throughout this book, therefore, I take it as axiomatic that Seneca in his tragedies is alert to the possible meanings and effects of theatrical performance, even if he does not have a specific form of staging in mind. When, for instance, he has the recently blinded Oedipus declare, 'this face befits Oedipus' (*vultus Oedipodam hic decet*, *Oed.* 1003), he activates an obvious reference to the mask,

⁵⁷ The APGRD database lists a substantial number of such performances (www.apgrd.ox.ac.uk/research-collections/performance-database/productions). Slaney (2016) is invaluable on the performance history both of Senecan drama and, more broadly, of the 'Senecan aesthetic' that permeates multiple Western theatre traditions.

⁵⁸ A point well made, in varying forms, by Hijmans (1966); Rosenmeyer (1989) 37–62; and Bartsch (2006) 208–29.

the dramatic *vultus* that designates Oedipus as a specific *persona* and signals that *persona* to the audience.⁵⁹ At an intradramatic level, however, in the imaginary world of the play, Oedipus' statement refers to the *face* as an index of identity. Specifically, the protagonist implies that his present appearance correlates with his moral and social state as the punished perpetrator of parricide and incest. The act of self-blinding is, for Seneca's Oedipus, a desperate effort to match punishment with crime: he seeks a form of retribution that isolates him from his deceased father and still (at this moment) living mother (*Oed.* 949–51); he aims to occupy an indeterminate space between life and death in echo of his confused familial status as son, father, brother, and husband; he associates blindness with the darkness of his wedding night (*Oed.* 977).⁶⁰ Hence, his mutilated face is a physically realised metaphor for his life, and evidence of his newfound congruence with himself. It is proof of *who* Oedipus is – his particularity as an individual – and this is where Seneca's cleverness becomes truly apparent, because as a mark of such identity, the face performs the same job as a mask. Drama allows for this degree of confluence in a way that most other fictional media do not. Seneca's audience is not faced with a strict choice between seeing a character's purely textual manifestation and seeing his/her quasi-human aspects. Rather, the two categories are shown to overlap, as the mask becomes a face and the face a mask, and audience members engage in the same process of decoding its symbolism regardless of whether they view the scene in a detached manner, as self-conscious metatheatre, or in a fully involved one.

Such overlap of blatantly fictional and quasi-human qualities is, I argue throughout, a distinctive feature of Seneca's *dramatis personae*. When Medea and Atreus seek recognition from their victims, they do so not just as self-aware performers, but also as moral agents seeking to confirm their behavioural consistency. When Pyrrhus and Astyanax are judged on the model of their heroic fathers, the comparison invokes both a personal, biological connection and

⁵⁹ Boyle (2011) *ad Oed.* 1003.

⁶⁰ Busch (2007) 254–60; Braund (2016) 60–1. In a related vein, Poe (1983) 155 argues that Oedipus' self-punishment is figured as an act of retribution, which implies its mirroring of his crime.

Introduction

the abstract repeatability of a copy. The bodily descriptions so prominent in *Phaedra* and *Oedipus* configure characters, simultaneously, as human analogues in possession of (illusory) minds and consciousness, and as purely textual surfaces offered up for interpretation. Finally, acts of revenge and suicide accentuate the characters' agency and autonomy at an intradramatic level while foreclosing it at an extradramatic one. Every manifestation of conscious fictionality in the tragedies is accompanied by an equivalent – mostly commensurate, sometimes conflicting – manifestation of implied humanness. The dynamic is compelling; it highlights Seneca's considerable power as poet and dramatist. And failing to acknowledge it means seeing only half of the story.