

Character™

Character-writing, Drama, and the Shape of Literary History

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ABSTRACT

This essay challenges the traditional historical narrative of character focused on Shakespeare’s epochal “inward turn.” It offers an alternative history that re-shapes the story of character around the cultural and commercial impact of so-called “non-Shakespearean” and “pre-modern” characters. Investigating intersections between the neo-Theophrastan “Character,” commercial drama, and news culture in seventeenth-century England, the essay traces the augmentation of character as a word and concept. Character was a key noun and verb in a shifting lexicon of identity, a new generic brand pioneered and appropriated by Ben Jonson and John Webster, and a rhetorical technology for estranging and trade-marking forms of humanity.

*The essay argues that the impact of the English Character-sketch—on theatre and performance, on news and print culture, and on the cult of the author—marked a historical turning point in consumer relations with virtual humanity. Character became a popular method of transforming persons, fictional and real, into coherent units of cultural value: *dramatis personae*, one’s neighbours or adversaries, scandalized court figures, kings and queens, even Shakespeare and Jonson as historical authors. In shaping this new story about character, the essay suggests that history and its agents are inevitably shaped by the characterological screens through which we view early modern culture, and through which the early moderns increasingly viewed themselves.*

We may divide characters into flat and round.

Flat characters were called “humours” in the seventeenth century, and are sometimes called types, and sometimes caricatures. In their purest form, they are constructed round a single idea or quality: when there is more than one factor in them, we get the beginning of the curve towards the round.

[...]

It is a convenience for an author when he can strike with his full force at once, and flat characters are very useful to him, since they never need reintroducing, never run away, have not to be watched for development, and provide their own atmosphere – little luminous disks of a prearranged size, pushed hither and thither like counters across the void or between the stars; most satisfactory.

—E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*

on or about December, 1910, human character changed

—Virginia Woolf, “Character in Fiction”

How is early modern literary history shaped, both by its own creative agents (authors, publishers, actors), and by cultural interpreters of early modernity (critics, historians, biographers)? This essay explores this question by investigating first the intersections between Character-writing (or “Charactery”), commercial drama, and news culture in early modern England, and second the implications of these intersections for the stories we tell about the development of literature and culture across time. Challenging the traditional

narrative of character focused on Shakespeare's innovations in the representation of "inwardness," I offer an alternative history that traces the rise of character as a key word in a shifting lexicon of identity, as a new generic brand pioneered and appropriated by Ben Jonson and John Webster (the neo-Theophrastan "Character"), and as a rhetorical technology for estranging and trade-marking forms of humanity. In doing so, I argue that the rise of the English Character-sketch and its cultural impact—on theatre and performance, on news and print culture, and on the cult of the author—marked a historical turning point in consumer relations with virtual humanity. Character became a popular method of transforming persons, fictional and real, into coherent units of cultural value.

This argument builds on formalist and rhetorical approaches to Character-writing by Christy Desmet, Aaron Kunin, and—in this special issue—Samuel Fallon, who have turned to neo-Theophrastan Character with fresh eyes to theorize character as, respectively, a technology of identity formation, a device that collects examples exhaustively, and a form of parody.¹ Yet at the heart of my discussion is a concern with how theories of character shape history and its agents. Whereas Fallon focuses on the parodic qualities of Character-writing in order to investigate the formalizing logic of character, I see the genre and the world-view it promoted as crucial to the "shaping" of literary and cultural history, including the making of Shakespeare central to the early modern canon.

In what follows, I address the dominance of the Shakespeare-centric narrative of character in early modernity, and its negation of the historical and cultural agency of "non-Shakespearean" or "pre-modern" character. My alternative history traces the extension of "character" as a word and concept, through the rise of the neo-Theophrastan Character, the emergence of news culture, and innovations of Websterian tragedy. I emphasise the formative power of what Blakey Vermeule, discussing human attachment to literary characters more generally, calls the public's "desire for social information" (xiv), and

particularly the commodity fetishization of cultural forms that impugned and arraigned the “character” of women, real and fictional. The final section shows how Character-writing created the conditions for literary biography as an apparatus of authorship, and the monumentalization of Shakespeare as an exemplary yet other-worldly dramatist, the author-character *par excellence* of literary history. Shakespeare’s authorial identity, I suggest, is deeply rooted in “non-Shakespearean” models and practices of character.

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Rubicons, Roundness, and Turning Points: Shaping Characters, Shaping History

The predominance of Shakespeare in character criticism has perpetuated a story about the rise of character as a literary technique and concept, a story adapted for modern critical sensibilities but not changed in recent scholarship. This story is shaped around an epochal event: Shakespeare’s inward turn on the turn of the seventeenth century. While acknowledging that modern senses of “character” (relating to individuality, psychology, and personality) did not arise until after the mid-seventeenth century,² early modernists tend to date the inception of modern ideas of character and characterization to a five- or six-year period in the middle of Shakespeare’s career. Between around 1595 and 1601, the story goes, Shakespeare took ravishing strides towards modernity through his innovations in the representation of “inwardness,” “subjectivity,” and “psychological depth.” *Hamlet* (c.1601) still reigns supreme as the game-changer, although history plays such as *Richard II* (1595) and *King John* (1596) often figure, and Shakespeare’s sonnets (variously dated between the mid-1590s and the early 1600s) have been read as inventing “poetic subjectivity.”³ *Julius Caesar*, probably composed in the spring of 1599, has been plotted as the turning point in the history of character, the play in which Shakespeare makes “his great leap forward into

psychological realism and depth” (Maus, “The Will of Caesar” 255). To adapt Virginia Woolf’s famous statement, on or about the spring of 1599, literary character changed.

In such accounts, Shakespeare himself figures as a kind of character within the meta-narrative of literary and cultural history, a meta-narrative shaped, distorted perhaps, by the desire to cast Shakespeare as a coherent and compelling protagonist. This is most apparent in commercially popular books that combine literary history with biography.⁴ In *Will in the World*, Stephen Greenblatt traces “the unprecedented representation of tormented inwardness” in *Hamlet* to “a deep wound, a wound that had never properly healed” since the death of Shakespeare’s son Hamnet in 1596 (311). Shakespeare thus cuts a tragic figure in Greenblatt’s narrative of psychic woundedness and artistic genius, a story of subject fracture and formation which owes as much to the modern realist novel as it does to Shakespearean tragedy.⁵ The subtitle of Greenblatt’s book, *How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*, hints at this narrative impulse: Shakespeare became Shakespeare through traumatic separation from the Shakespeare he used to be, a Shakespeare who wrote in a less modern way. This tale of two Shakespeares blends psychologically compelling narrative with anthropological analysis of the author’s literary remains. By reading Shakespeare through his characters, a literary biographer curates those characters as Shakespearean *exuviae*, in belief that Shakespeare created them—as Greenblatt has argued more recently—as “detachable parts of himself.”⁶

Yet literary criticism is also coloured by strategies of narrativization and characterization. For Cynthia Marshall, Shakespeare’s dramatization of Plutarchan narrative in *Julius Caesar* and later Roman plays established “our culture’s prevailing model of character as one that is at once intensely performative and putatively interiorized” (73). Drawing on Plutarch’s account of Caesar’s decision to cross the river Rubicon, an action leading to the civil wars, Marshall suggests that Shakespeare crossed his own Rubicon:

The vexing process of moral decision-making in fact serves as the focus not only of *Julius Caesar* but of *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *Measure for Measure* — the great character dramas of the early 1600s. These plays are followed in logical and chronological order by those that focus on the *effects* of tragic decision: *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*. To impose a narrative of my own, Shakespeare had to cross this symbolic Rubicon, marking off the richly inventive but largely plot-driven plays of the 1590s from the deeply characterological dramas that follow, in order to take possession of his territory as a dramatist. (80)

Shakespeare-as-Caesar is the agent of this irreversible historical event, but also the product of Marshall's own self-conscious act of narrativization, the critical decision "To impose a narrative of my own."

Such narratives are compelling, but they obscure a larger story, or multiple stories, of character yet to be told. A literary history punctuated by Rubicons, crossed through acts of sovereign solo-authorship, satisfies a need to view Shakespeare as game-changer, trend-setter, path-breaker. It conceals, however, the significance of collaboration, non-authorial agency, and material and market forces. The intense focus on Shakespeare has rendered the history of "non-Shakespearean" character something of a blank, or else an aside that throws Shakespeare's innovations into sharp relief. The influential early experiments in humoral characterization of George Chapman and Ben Jonson, at the same time as Shakespeare's supposed inward turn in the late 1590s, are often figured as a kind of outward turn, towards fixed, mechanical types which are viewed as essentially un-Shakespearean, or rudimentary models which Shakespeare subverts and exceeds in order to bring "more complex individuation to the stock idea" (Palfrey 242).⁷ E.M. Forster's equation of "humours" with "flat" characters in *Aspects of the Novel* (75-76) has stuck, even though that "roundest" of Shakespeare's characters, Falstaff,⁸ Harold Bloom's central proof that "Shakespeare invented

literary character as we know it” (*Falstaff* 6), was originally marketed in relation to a demand for humoral characters. The title-page to the 1598 quarto of *I Henry IV* offers book-buyers “*the humorous conceits of Sir Iohn Falstalffe.*” Try as Bloom might, Falstaff cannot be separated from his identity as a “trunk of humours” (*I Henry IV* 2.4.409), a character shaped by and for a popular demand for “humorous companions” launched by Chapman’s *An Humorous Day’s Mirth* (1597; ii.10).⁹

Just as characters are made to bear shapes, dimensions and trajectories (flatness, roundness, depth, arcs), literary history and its agents are made to bear shapes by critical narratives. Novels, E.M. Forster claims, *need* their flat characters, “little luminous disks of a prearranged size pushed hither and thither like counters across the void or between the stars” (76). So do literary histories. As protagonist, Shakespeare’s centrality depends on the peripheral narrative presence of contemporary writers, as minor or supporting characters in his story, and indeed on the spectral presence of “early Shakespeare” as a characterological Other from which Shakespeare separates in the late 1590s. To theorize the spatial relationship between these author-characters of literary history, we can turn to Alex Woloch’s definition of literary character in the novel as a product of choices of narrative distribution, wherein fictional persons are shaped by “the narrative’s continual apportioning of attention to different characters who jostle for limited space within the same fictive universe” (13).¹⁰ Shakespeare’s expansive “character-space” in literary history is contingent upon the narrative diminishing, but not erasure, of contemporary writers, in a hierarchical “character-system” of authors and other creative agents.¹¹

The narrative choice to magnify Shakespeare in 1599 and turn away from, say, Jonson is difficult to resist,¹² since while Jonson jostles for space in literary history, we know (or think we know) how this story ends: with the apotheosis of Shakespeare in the eighteenth century and, more specifically, the emergence of a Shakespeare-centric character criticism

from the 1770s onwards.¹³ There is pressure on historians of literary character to give this ending a beginning, to trace a coherent or shapely narrative line from Shakespeare's breakthrough, the birth of character *avant la lettre*, through to modern notions of character, even if the latter is in fact the conceptual starting point. By contrast, the story that magnifies Jonson and turns away from Shakespeare appears counterfactual, for "flat" characters or "humours," we are told, feel pre-modern. The history that flows forward from Shakespeare's invention of modern character is compelling precisely because it is the stuff of good fiction, because it provides a unified narrative structure for that fiction we call literary history. Searching for "the curve towards the round," Shakespeare works towards modernity at the centre of an early modern universe of smaller, counter-like authors, who jostle for narrative space but never take over the story.

How, then, might we change the story about literary character? Or rather, how might we put it in productive dialogue with other narratives which shed new or different light on the historical development of early modern literature and culture? Central to my alternative history of character is the Character-writer's impulse to name, define and categorize different forms of humanity for public consumption, to "Character" or trade-mark the Other by a kind of taxonomic violence. I begin in 1613, the year Shakespeare retired.

* * *

Character Augmented

On 13 December 1613, the publisher and bookseller Lawrence Lisle acquired the right to publish a poem about a virtuous wife, entitled *A Wife, now a widowe*. The author, Sir Thomas Overbury, was the late secretary to the favourite of James I, Robert Carr, Viscount Rochester, and had died in the Tower of London in September. Lisle's second edition of *A Wife*,

published in May 1614, named Overbury as author and added, as the title-page stated, *many witty Characters, and conceited Newes, written by himselfe, and other learned Gentlemen his friends*. The *many witty Characters*, brief prose sketches of human types, were a massive hit. Three more editions of *A Wife* were published in 1614, with many more to follow, and the appended collection of “Characters” was repeatedly augmented, as announced by new title-pages: *New and Choise Characters* (6th edition, 1615), *divers more Characters, (never before annexed)* (10th edition, 1618), *With Additions of New Characters* (13th edition, 1628).¹⁴

By the eleventh edition of 1622, Lisle’s last, the community of Characters had grown to 83, decentering Overbury’s poem and forming the bulk of a diverse, multi-authored miscellany that included liminary verses, elegies on Overbury’s death, news items, paradoxes, and even playful mountebank recipes. The difficult matter of the Characters’ authorship is not helped by the curious packaging of the miscellany as Overbury’s monument and remains, a textual “wife” widowed by his death and supported by his friends.¹⁵ Overbury is unlikely to have written anything in the miscellany beyond the central poem, and the apparent literary circle of *other learned Gentlemen his friends* was probably invented by Lisle in order to appeal to middling readers who felt excluded from courtly and coterie textual cultures (Considine 73-74). Characters in the collection have been attributed to Thomas Dekker, John Ford, and John Donne, among others, and it is now widely agreed that John Webster anonymously contributed thirty-two sketches to the sixth edition of 1615, and probably edited the edition as a whole.¹⁶ It is possible that Webster had met Overbury while studying at Middle Temple, and was central to a network of gentlemanly authors who knew Overbury and were connected through the Inns of Court. However, to assume so would be to try and maintain the convenient fiction of “the Overbury circle.” Literary circles are “cataloguing mechanism[s]” of literary history, “less found objects than artifacts of the

discovery process, constructed to serve varied critical, theoretical, and historical ends” (Herz 15). They trace networks and forms of circulation (of ideas, texts, power), but they also contain authors, publishers, and genres in cultural moments and communities that are historically circumscribed. Shakespeare tends to escape this cataloguing mechanism, for circles—always turning back on themselves, rather than curving towards modernity like round characters—do not fit the narrative of Shakespeare’s heroic character arc cutting across Rubicons of history.

Thinking in circles, it is easy to dismiss Character-writing as a “fad,” “craze,” or “sub-genre,” governed by an obsessive rule of return to a bounded pre-modern cultural moment.¹⁷ Yet in Lisle and Webster’s hands, the publication and augmentation of the *Overbury Characters* was a historical turning point in consumer relations with virtual humanity. The collection opened up a market for “Character-books,” written by aspiring Character-writers such as John Stephens, John Earle, and Richard Brathwait. These Character-writers, or “Characterists” in Webster’s coinage, drew on the ancient rhetorical models of Theophrastus’ *Kharaktíres*, written in the fourth century BC, which were translated into Latin in the 1590s by Isaac Casaubon, and then imitated in English with a prescriptive Christian framework by Joseph Hall (a future bishop) in his moralizing *Characters of Vertues and Vices* of 1608. But the *Overbury Characters* were different, more witty and satirical than earlier Character-books, more concerned with social commentary than moral abstraction. They were also a generic and stylistic hodge-podge, drawing on—to name but a few—pithy epigrams, aphoristic essays, satiric prose, rogue literature, and, perhaps most importantly, humoral comedy.¹⁸

Why was the *Overbury* collection and the genre it popularized such a success? What was the appeal of these Characters? A Character-book offered readers a community they could fit in their pocket, a collection of human creatures discretely sketched in concise and

colourful prose, verbal dissections of the types of people that browsing book-buyers might think they knew themselves. Here's "A Puritan," "a diseased piece of apocrypha [...] He is often drunk, but not as we are, temporally, nor can his sleep then cure him, for the fumes of his ambition make his very soul reel." Here's a "Proud Man," "When he vouchsafes to bless the air with his presence, he goes as near the wall as his satin suit will give him leave, and every passenger he views under eyebrows to observe whether he veils his bonnet low enough, which he returns with an imperious nod." Here's "A Whore," "Her body is the tilted lees of pleasure dashed over with a little decking to hold colour. Taste her, she's dead and false upon the palate." (Beecher 226, 282, 227-28)

Such sketches modulate the reader's "palate" to disgust, or perhaps a perverse relish, working to show what Joseph Hall theatrically called "vice strip't naked to the open view" (B1v). (Characters of virtuous types were less common, and seem initially to have had less purchase on the cultural imagination.) Implicitly positioned as a white male subject, the moralizing Characterist speaks from racist, classist and misogynistic perspectives; women are typically categorized as wives, widows or whores. His smug and knowing voice transforms the sketch into an anatomy theatre, a schoolroom, a court of law, working to make persons "thing-like and knowable" (Womack 55) for a paying public. Through a learned rhetorical performance, the Characterist curates a Character as a cultural unit of consumable Otherness, an uncanny specimen of humanity.¹⁹ What is being solicited in many of these sketches, disturbingly, is not identification with the Character, but sociable agreement with the Characterist who seems to know the character so well. The reader is always just a smile or a nod away from complicity. The pleasure of this cognitive twitch is hard to resist: shared knowledge of the Character is a warm bath we slip into. "He's often drunk, but not as we are," we read of the Puritan, "not as we are." The reader is pressured to agree, to nod and say yes, yes, I know him, how disgusting, how true, I know one just like him.

My nodding reader here is imagined, but there is evidence of actual reader responses in extant copies of Character-books. A copy of the sixth edition of John Earle's *Micro-Cosmographie; Or, A Peece of the World Discouered in Essayes and Characters* (1630; Folger Shakespeare Library, shelfmark STC 7443) was enthusiastically marked up by a reader in the 1730s called Roger Kedington. Kedington copied into the frontpapers of his old edition the anonymous preface to the recent 1732 edition (A3r-A4v), which reflects on the relevance of the book to the present time: "Reflections founded upon Nature will be just in the main as long as Men are Men, tho' the particular Instances of vice & folly may be diversified." (A3v) Apparently motivated by this idea, Kedington noted members of his own community next to almost half the Characters in Earle's book. "A Discontented Man" is identified as "John Knights" (C4v), "A Church-Papist" as "Master Lomax" (D1v), "A rash man" as "Master Edgar" (H6v), and so on. Poor "Rose Tresham" is named next to sketches of "A Child" (B1r), "A Player" (H2r), "A She precise Hypocrite" (K2v), and others. Kedington evidently saw this Character-book as a social tool-kit for reading and placing real people, for mapping, in John Earle's metaphor, the human cosmography of his personal universe.

Earlier examples suggest that Characters had long been read as "real," or as having real-life applications, across different cultural spaces. William Prynne's anti-theatrical tract *Histrion-mastix* (1633) cites Characters as evidence when maligning Inns of Court students for unruly behaviour at stage-plays. A discrete note in the margin indicates Prynne is drawing not on first-hand experience but sketches from best-selling Character-books: "See Earles Character of a Player, Charact. 38. & Sir Thomas Overbury his Character of an Innes of Court man, accordingly." (**3v)²⁰ John Stephens' revised and augmented octavo edition of his *Essayes and Characters, Ironical and Instructive* (1615) adds defensive notes responding to complaints by readers of the first edition, published earlier that year. "Many of the nation

were offended lately with this Character,” he comments after the sketch of “A wrangling Welch Client” (352).²¹ Such notes may be a marketing ploy designed to sensationalize Characters and exaggerate their cultural reach, but they suggest the capacity of Characters to be weaponized and shake up communities. The most acerbic Character-writing in Stephens’ revised Character-book is reserved for a real person, the unnamed author of “An Excellent Actor” in the sixth edition of the Overbury collection (1615), now known beyond reasonable doubt to be John Webster. Responding to Webster’s mockery of the author of “A common Player” as it appeared in Stephens’ first edition, the opening leaves of Stephens’ second edition stage a Character assassination in verse and prose, drawing on the rhetoric of vice Character-writing to brand Webster a “dog-skin witt” (A3r), “*a rude boisterous Knave*” (A4v), a “cuttle-fish” spewing “inky gall” (A8r), and—sticking the knife in—a bad Character-writer, the author of an “*unlickt*” and “deformed” Character, “the purblind whelp of a lean bitch” (A6r-7r). The spat which frames Stephens’ Character-book illustrates how Characters latched onto real people, as authors, models, and targets. It also suggests the growing perception of Characters as rhetorical weapons to be wielded in different cultural contexts. Augmenting by hand his century-old copy of Earle’s Character-book in the 1730s, Roger Kedington recognised a long established social use-value of the Character-sketch: its capacity to shape one’s sense of self by categorizing others.

The rise of the English Character-sketch, then, involved the bookish augmentation of characters by authors, stationers, and marking readers who left traces of their own human networks. Character-books accrued human types as bibliographic units of value, quantified by paratextual lists designed to help readers navigate their way through virtual communities, from numbered contents pages to manuscript indexes penned by readers (see Figure 1).²² Like character lists in early printed playbooks, these lists advertised the value of the characterological unit.²³ Indeed, one of the earliest known English uses of the word character

to refer to Character-sketches occurs in a dramatic character list: the 1600 quarto of Ben Jonson's *Every Man Out of His Humour* provides a prefatory list of dramatis personae "with the seuerall Character of euery Person," as the title-page announces, each Character consisting of a short, satirical prose description. Fastidius Briske, for example, is "A Neate, spruce, affecting Courtier, one that wears clothes wel, and in Fashion; practiseth by his glasse how to salute," and so on (A2r).²⁴ The use of "Character" in this sense may even be a new coinage in print, with Jonson turning to Theophrastus as part of his experimentation with dramatis personae in humoral comedy.²⁵ Jonson, a keen etymologist, would have appreciated the rootedness of "Character" in ideas of cutting and engraving,²⁶ as he sharpened the satirical edge of humoral character and explored its capacity to anatomize or bleed out vice and folly.

Characters in			
	A Souldier	--	27
1	A Taylor	- . . .	28
2	A Puritan	- . . .	29
3	A Whore	- . . .	30
4	A very Whore	- . . .	31
5	A more com Lawyer		32
7	A more Scholler		33
8	A Tinker	- . . .	34
8	A Apparition		35
9	An almonchmaster		36
10	An Hipocrite	- . . .	37
11	A magicians lab. & baub		38
12	A chambermaid	- . . .	39
13	A Pedicition	- . . .	40
14	A Inns Court man	- . . .	41
15	A meer fellow of a soule		42
16	A wretched woman in the		43
17	A vain ambitious forward	- . . .	44
18	A Pyrate	- . . .	45
19	An ordinary fencer		46
20	A Drury clerk	- . . .	47
21	A Hood man	- . . .	48
22	An old wits doughty		49
23	An Intruder in the fauour		50
24	A faire haps milkmaid		51
25	A wretched fellow		52
26	A roving boy	- . . .	53

Fig. 1: A numbered manuscript index penned by an early reader in the endpapers of a copy of the 16th edition of the Overbury collection (1638). Corresponding numbers are noted by hand next to individual titles in the book. Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin, shelfmark Ah Ov28 614wp. Author's photograph.

This brings us to the augmentation of character as a word with a growing family of cognates in the English language. In the early seventeenth century, the genre of Character-writing was labelled "charactery," a word associated with shorthand since the 1580s, Character-sketches were named "characterisms," and Character-writers became

“characterists.”²⁷ These terms joined a host of others being experimented with by writers: “charactered,” “characterical,” “characteristical,” “characterize.”²⁸ A dynamic and shifting term, “character” connected disciplines as diverse as mathematics, medicine, alchemy, physiognomy, geometry, astrology, theology, and music. The “real-character” movement of the mid-seventeenth century, culminating in John Wilkins’s ambitious *Essay Towards a Real Character* (published by the Royal Society in 1668), sought a revolution in communication technology that would overcome obstacles between languages by developing a “real” or “universal” character.²⁹ From the late sixteenth century onwards, across disciplines “character” and its cognates signified practices of notation, ellipsis and deciphering. To learn how to read and write characters in a given field was to be inducted into a knowledge-system that compressed information into elliptical forms, signs and symbols only understood by the initiated. John Willis’s *Art of Stenographie* (1602), a handbook on how to read and use the “Characters” of shorthand (“Character signifieth a Marke, Note, Impression, Figure; written, engrauen, stampt, or howsoeuer else made,” A5r), makes a note of exclusion: “I haue pretermitted the Characters vsed by the Physitians in their prescriptes: the Characters of Geometrie, Musicke, Magicke, Alchymie; they being such as are familiar to none, but the Children of those Artes.” (D1v)

In Christopher Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* (c.1592), enigmatic “Characters” seduce the insatiably curious protagonist with promise of forbidden knowledge. “Lines, Circles, Letters, Characters: / I these are those that Faustus most desires” (A3r), he exclaims, poring over books on metaphysics and necromancy, and later summons Mephistopheles with “Characters of Signes, and euening Starres, / By which the spirits are inforc’d to rise” (B1r). The woodcut on the title-page to the 1616 quarto, the play’s “B-text,” visualises this moment of incantation-by-Characters, picturing Faustus with a book in hand as he stands at the centre

of a circle (a demonic “O”) of cabbalistic signs and symbols. Before him squats Mephistopheles in a demonic shape, looking like a decorous piece of blackletter type.

“Character,” then, was being re-shaped as a word across different fields of knowledge in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and it carried associations with technologies of inscription and engraving, highly literate forms of reading, esoteric knowledge, and the compression of information into compact units of signification (shapes, symbols, letters, emblems). Seizing on the word and its cross-cultural cachet, Character-writers embarked on a philological project, preoccupied with the history and semantics of “Character” (usually capitalized in the context of Character-writing). They collectively appropriated the term—as a noun and a verb—in a form of generic branding, comparable to Michel de Montaigne’s and Francis Bacon’s use of the word “essay.”³⁰

Character-books often included, strangely, Characters of Characters, short essays which suggest a close relationship between Character and lexicography, between the orderly collection and definition of persons as bundles of interpretable human signs, and the orderly collection and definition of words as interpretable linguistic signs. In “What a Character Is,” the terminal Character added in the tenth edition of the Overbury collection (1618), the Characterist begins by styling himself as a schoolmaster explaining the meaning of the word:

If I must speak the schoolmaster’s language, I will confess that “character” comes of this infinitive mood, χαραζω [*kharázo*], which signifies to engrave or make a deep impression. And for that cause a letter (as A.B.) is called a character. (Beecher 293)

As Aaron Kunin shrewdly observes, this Characterist, unusually present in the first person, speaks *in character*, as someone other than himself, “the schoolmaster.” The expected lead-in verb “Is”—the cornerstone of any Character-writer’s rhetorical performance—becomes the conditional “If,” introducing a hypothetical script to be performed (Kunin 48). Altering one letter, one “character,” the Characterist signals a self-conscious playfulness and invites

readers to play along, to listen like students in a schoolroom as a philological performance unfolds, and the word morphs into different shapes and senses under his magic touch. “Character” is first given depth, as a negative space created by breaking a surface (an engraved mark, a deep impression, “a strong seal in our memories”). Next it is tightly compressed into “an impresa or a short emblem, in little comprehending much,” gesturing to Character-writing’s kinship to shorthand (“character”) and emblem-making, as a concise art that packs social information into a small space. “To square out a character by our English level,” the Characterist goes on, casually knocking the word into a new form, “it is a picture, real or personal, quaintly drawn in various colors, all of them heightened by one shadowing” (Beecher 293). With a final flourish, the Characterist makes music with “Character”: “It is a quick and soft touch of many strings all shutting up in one musical close” (Beecher 293). True to the genre, the essay works under the pretense of definitional precision but is in fact playful and impressionistic. We may be left wondering what a character is, after all, but we are left in no doubt that the Characterist is the master of it. The *Overbury Characters* ends with the Characterist-as-schoolmaster, holding the very word “Character” in the palm of his hand.

“What a Character Is,” for all its playfulness, is a serious attempt to secure a word as a brand without limiting its possibilities, to trade-mark a genre that promised to revolutionise the shape of social information for the paying public. “Character,” as often a verb as a noun,³¹ was a mode of knowledge, a way of seeing the world, a capacity to augment one’s own reality and one’s understanding of other people. Character-writers were intensely concerned with what it meant to write, print, sell, and read “Characters,” yet the proliferation of definitions in *Characters of Characters* suggested the meaning of the word, and indeed the purpose of the genre it fronted, were up for grabs. It was dramatists who grabbed “Character” first, spying its theatrical potential as a fashionable and dynamic word, but also as a

performing voice and a rhetorical method that could be used to augment characterological identities in the playhouse.

* * *

**“I’ll give their perfect character”:
Tragedy, News Culture, and the “Character” of Woman**

From their inception in England, neo-Theophrastan Characters gravitated to the English commercial playhouse, and were saturated in cultures of performance. In Character-books, “A Puny Clerk” can be found “eat[ing] ginger bread at a playhouse” (Beecher 252). “The Proud Man” will always give twelve pence for “the best room” in the theatre if he has it (Beecher 282). “A Ruffian” forces entry into a two-penny room after the second act, “where being furnished with Tinder, Match, and a portion of decayed *Barmoodas* [a kind of cigar], they smoake it most terribly, applaud a prophane jeast unmeasurably, and in the end grow distastefully rude to all the Companie” (Brathwait, *Whimzies* 134-35). As well as placing Characters in playhouses, Characterists advertised the inherent theatricality of humanity. “All men have been of his occupation” writes Webster in “An Excellent Actor,” slipping into a Character of humanity itself, “and indeed what he doth feignedly, that do others essentially” (Beecher 277). The Character-writer’s method, peeling back surfaces to reveal more surfaces, gestures to the essential performativity of human identity. In his 1608 *Characters*, Joseph Hall parades virtues then vices across a “stage” (B2r), meaning the Character-book itself. The vices are led by “The Hypocrite,” one who—fulfilling his Greek etymon, *hypokrites*, a stage actor—is “the worst kinde of plaier, by so much as he acts the better part” (71). Such sketches opened a gap between acting and being which was vital to ideas about theatricality and inwardness.³²

Jonson led the way in translating the Theophrastan Character to drama, but other playwrights followed (Dekker, Middleton, and Shirley, to name but a few), experimenting with the commercial and aesthetic value of “Character” as a newly resonant word and as a rhetorical method in the theatre.³³ Shakespeare too was deeply struck by the dramatic possibilities of Character-writing, despite the critical tendency to view Theophrastan Character as inferior or antithetical to Shakespearean character.³⁴ For Jonson, the Theophrastan Character belonged to the world of comedy. For Shakespeare, the Character had tragic potential, and especially the voice of the Characterist as he observes and categorizes human types. Shakespeare explores the Theophrastan sense of the word “Character” in his Roman tragedy *Coriolanus* (c.1608),³⁵ but if we only follow the word we miss what Shakespeare saw in Character-writing. The word “character” appears nowhere in *Othello* (c.1604), yet we can hear the detached, knowing voice of the Characterist in Iago.³⁶ Iago is one who prides himself on being able to cut to the heart of who someone is, to distill their essence, by placing them in a category. Iago is a taxonomist, a trader in types, a seeming fountain of social knowledge who invites the uninitiated to drink deep. “The wine she drinks is made of grapes,” he tells Roderigo, painting Desdemona as sexually voracious, a typical Venetian woman who will doubtless tire or sicken of Othello. “Her eye must be fed. [...] very nature will instruct her in it, and compel her to some second choice” (2.1.244, 219-20, 228-29).³⁷ Later, in the temptation scene, Iago seeks to persuade Othello that Desdemona is one of “them,” a Venetian woman:

I know our country disposition well:

In Venice they do let God see the pranks

They dare not show their husbands; their best conscience

Is not to leave't undone, but keep't unknown. (3.3.204-7)

Such is to say: believe me, I know her type, or—in Jonson’s recent coinage—I know her Character. Othello sees Iago as someone who *knows* people, as a trusted source of social information: “This fellow’s of exceeding honesty”, Othello muses to himself, “And knows all qualities, with a learnèd spirit / Of human dealings.” (3.3.261-63) Iago presents himself to the world as a living Character-book, an index of humanity, a manual on how to navigate the world by reading other people.

Iago’s military office of “ensign” (1.1.32) or flag-bearer complements his social identity as an observer and displayer of human signs. “Character” and “ensign” (in the sense of emblem or badge) were synonyms,³⁸ and seventeenth-century Character-books were deeply invested in the ontology of sign-bearing. Samuel Person’s “Character of a Character,” in his *Anatomical Lecture of Man* (1664), defines someone’s character as “his Flag, Banner, or Ensign that hangs out, intimating what’s within” (4). Iago subverts the idea that a person’s outward behaviour intimates what’s within. In the first scene, he tells Roderigo ‘I am not what I am’ (1.1.65), and, playing on his role as ensign, declares ‘I must show out a flag and sign of love— / Which is indeed but sign.’ (1.1.155-56) Iago’s “outward action” is marked as distinct from what he calls “The native act and figure of my heart” (1.1.61-62), which remains elusive to the end of the play.³⁹ The adjective “native,” Ian Smith has shown, gestures towards the presumed native whiteness of Iago’s “ontological complexity.” In the “transracial” theatre, where “[r]acial prosthetics evinced blackness as material object devoid of interiority,” Othello’s ontology was inevitably circumscribed by his blackness, possibly signified using dyed cloth.⁴⁰ Flagged by the play as well as Iago as an instance of a racialized and stigmatized type, “the Moor,”⁴¹ Othello’s identity is tragically anchored—“moored,” as Miles P. Grier suggests—in the world-view that Iago the Characterist represents and spreads, potentially to audiences as well as other characters.⁴² Shakespeare, cued by Jonson’s experiments in comedy, spied in the new genre of the Character an ideological seed of

tragedy, a rhetorical method for representing the disintegration of human relations driven by the desire for information about human difference, about what separates the Self from the Other. In *Othello*, Shakespeare centres that tragedy of social relations on the process by which Iago impugns Desdemona's Character in Othello's mind.

Othello's tragedy of social misinformation tapped into the sinister allure of the Characterist's art. Yet, lest I forget in the telling that this is not Shakespeare's story, Character's moment had not quite arrived. We must look forward a decade in order to understand the full cultural impact of Character-writing on the stage and beyond. Writing, reading and performing Theophrastan Characters was about collecting and applying social information. The combination of *Characters* with *Newes* in the Overbury collection suggests Character-books were marketed as repositories of social information in the period just prior to the rise of news-sheets and news-books in the 1620s and 1630s.⁴³ In fact, the perceived value and pleasure of Characters lay not only in mapping types onto particular people one knew, as with the example of Roger Kedington. In the short term at least, the brand of the Character owed much to a real-life celebrity scandal, the "Overbury Scandal." In the summer of 1615, it emerged that Overbury's death in the Tower of London had involved foul play, and was the result, it was reported, of a poisoned enema. As secretary to Robert Carr, Overbury had been privy to Carr's romantic involvement with Lady Frances Howard prior to the annulment of her marriage to Robert Devereaux, third Earl of Essex, on the grounds of impotence. When Overbury actively opposed a prospective marriage between Carr and Howard, Carr arranged for, or acquiesced in, Overbury's imprisonment. Ten days after Overbury's convenient death on 15 September 1613, Howard's marriage to Essex was nullified, and on 26 December, Howard married Carr, the newly minted Earl of Somerset. Confessions by accomplices in the summer of 1615, however, led to further investigation into Overbury's murder, and ultimately the arrest, trial and conviction of Carr and Howard. Both

were pardoned but remained imprisoned until 1622. Frances Howard was the primary target of public scorn, and was reviled in manuscript and print as a murderer, a witch, and a whore.⁴⁴

Stranger than fiction, this court scandal generated a market for Overbury-related printed ephemera, including illustrated pamphlets and broadsides in which Overbury and his executed assassins, resurrected as compelling characters in the marketplace of print, spoke to the public in verse from beyond the grave.⁴⁵ The publicity opened a door for Lawrence Lisle and his poem *A Wife, widowed by Overbury's death*, and its appended *Characters*. Bruce McIver has shown that the commercial success of the *Overbury Characters*, and the wider popularity of the new genre, was largely driven by Lawrence Lisle's capitalization on the Overbury scandal, as he timed new editions and added topical material in response to new events. Lisle tapped a market for information about an unfolding story of the court in which Overbury, Carr and Howard themselves became characters of sorts, and "the greatest source of public interest [...] was that stimulated in the principal character, Lady Frances Howard, and, by extrapolation, the character of woman herself" (McIver 29).

In the 1610s the genre and rhetoric of "Character" took firm root in literary and print culture not only because it supplied a demand for gossip and social information, but also because it fed a public desire to conflate characters and real people. I refer here not to the critical vice of treating literary characters as real people, but to the social phenomenon of treating real people as characters. This phenomenon is familiar in our world of celebrities and social media; it was also pronounced in a period when news culture was not separate from literary and theatrical culture.

The case of Frances Howard illustrates how the perceived character of a public or historical figure, particularly in a moral sense, can be shaped or augmented by fictional characters. If Overbury returned as a ghostly character of print culture, Howard was a spectre

on the Jacobean stage. As David Lindley has argued, Howard, or rather her cultural image, both shaped and was shaped by the characterization of figures such as Beatrice-Joanna in Middleton and Rowley's *The Changeling* (1622), illustrating that "pre-existing and culturally determined matrices of story and character determine our perceptions of fictional and historical figures alike" (79). Several decades later after the scandal, the Somersets' marriage was dramatized in Francis Osborne's *The True Tragicomedy Formerly Acted at Court* (c.1654). The manuscript of the play (British Library, Add MS 25348) is prefaced by "lively pictures or characters," long Character-sketches of the represented historical figures, offered as monuments "that may not impossibly outlast their marble that own them" (Osborne 3). Alluding to both the *Overbury Characters* and Jonson's use of Character-sketches in dramatic character lists, the historical Character-portraits that open *The True Tragicomedy* suggest that the desire to view the scandal of Frances Howard through the prism of Character-writing endured for a long time.

Howard's trial is sometimes connected to the arraignment of Vittoria Corombona for adultery and murder in Webster's tragedy *The White Devil*, first performed and printed in 1612, several years *before* the trial of Howard.⁴⁶ Based on the mid-sixteenth century Italian noblewoman Vittoria Accoramboni, Webster's Vittoria—like the Frances Howard vilified following her trial—has a complex relationship with fiction and reality. Their names both became shorthand (literally "characters" in that sense) for the beautiful, high-born fallen woman, exemplars of adulteresses and murderesses held up to public view as objects of disgust and fascination. Webster's Vittoria would ultimately, in the 1650s, become a characterological template for Richard Brathwait's portrait of Frances Howard as "the matchless English-Corombona," in a kind of compact Character-poem thickened by compound nouns:

Femall-Divell, plots-contriver,

Worths-tormenter, lifes depriver;

Tragick actor, blood effuser,

Times-corrupter, States-abuser;

Brothel-Turner, virgin-Trader,

Husband-hater, Lusts-perswader (Brathwait, *An Excellent Piece* G2r)

Brathwait himself wrote several Character-books (e.g. *Whimzies*, 1631), and may have been inspired by Webster's use of a verse Character-sketch in the arraignment scene of *The White Devil*.⁴⁷ Cardinal Monticelso, acting as prosecuting lawyer and judge, aggressively sets forth a Character of "a whore" to Vittoria:

VITTORIA. Ha? Whore—what's that?

MONTICELSO. Shall I expound whore to you? Sure I shall;

I'll give their perfect character. They are, first,

Sweetmeats which rot the eater; in man's nostrils

Poison'd perfumes. They are coz'ning alchemy,

Shipwrecks in calmest weather. What are whores?

Cold Russian winters, that appear so barren

As if that nature had forgot the spring.

They are the true material fire of hell,

Worse than those tributes i'th'Low Countries paid,

Exactions upon meat, drink, garments, sleep—

Ay, even on man's perdition, his sin.

They are those brittle evidences of law

Which forfeit all a wretched man's estate

For leaving out one syllable. What are whores?

They are those flattering bells have all one tune,
 At weddings, and at funerals. Your rich whores
 Are only treasuries by extortion filled,
 And emptied by cursed riot. They are worse,
 Worse than dead bodies which are begged at gallows,
 And wrought upon by surgeons, to teach man
 Wherein he is imperfect. What's a whore?
 She's like the guilty counterfeited coin
 Which, whosoe'er first stamps it, brings in trouble
 All that receive it.

VITTORIA. This character 'scapes me. (3.2.78-101)

Monticelso's culminating image of a counterfeit coin cues Vittoria's devastating half line, "This character 'scapes me," which dismisses Monticelso's misogynistic tirade as unintelligible or ineffective, but also produces a pun on "character," here signifying both a Character-sketch and the stamp on a coin. From its inception in English culture, Character-writing was compared to forging portraits in coins and medals, invoking the material sense of "character" as a stamp, brand, or engraved mark. Ancient Character-writers, Joseph Hall declares, "dr[ew] out the lineaments of euery virtue and vice, so liuely, that who saw the medals, might know the face" (A5r). Monticelso's public Charactering of Vittoria as "a whore" is a form of rhetorical branding, a dramatization of the state's administrative sorting, often through literal judicial branding, of criminalized bodies.⁴⁸ Monticelso tries to stamp Vittoria as a medal and monument of whoredom, entering into legal record social information gathered from gossip and cultural representations that have started to transform Vittoria into a fictional type. "Alas," the Cardinal cries, "I make but repetition / Of what is ordinary and Rialto talk, / And balladed, and would be played o'th' stage" (3.2.246-48).

Monticelso attempts to re-write Vittoria's legal personhood by accumulating metaphors that seem to have been collected on the Rialto, and when the murder charge will not stick, he sends her to a place that collects "whores," "a house of convertites" (3.2.263). The administrative enterprise of Monticelso's human cataloguing is made manifest in the next act, when he proudly shows Francisco his "black book" or "general catalogue of knaves" (4.1.33, 63). The criminalized types featured—panders, pirates, bankrupts, usurers, courtesans, murderers—would become a stock and trade of Character-books.⁴⁹ Disturbingly, Monticelso's Character-sketch was later plucked from Webster's play and circulated as testimony on the nature of "whores," without acknowledgement of its dramatic context: the playwright and actor Thomas Jordan draws on it extensively when defining "A Whore" in his verse Character-book *Pictures of Passions* (1641; E2r-E3r). The third quarto of *The White Devil* (1665) was sold alongside Character-books on the stalls of the publishers William Crooke and John Playfere.⁵⁰ The character list provided in this edition ("The Persons") is footed by a short Latin poem by the playwright John Wilson on the author's intentions ("In mentem autoris"), beginning "Do you want to know what woman is? What fury she excites?"⁵¹ Strangely echoing Monticelso's Character of "a whore," Wilson's epigraph promises the play will reveal the character of woman.

But in Webster's play, Vittoria speaks back: "This character 'scapes me." Her pun on "character" exposes the counterfeit nature of the portrait Monticelso has coined to defame her as a disgusting specimen of whoredom. Vittoria's response draws us in, provoking questions about her elusive identity as one whose "true" character escapes consistent representation in the play.⁵² Even in this scene we are sent in different directions by the commentary of an internal audience of ambassadors: the French Ambassador says "She hath lived ill," whereas the English Ambassador notes her "brave spirit" (III.ii.106, 140). Vittoria's identity—pointedly disjunctive, multi-faceted, ambiguous—is more complex than Monticelso's

Character-sketch. Yet Webster uses Character-writing in a metatheatrical context to supplement Vittoria's dramatic characterization, and to provoke reflection on the place of "character" in theatre and beyond, where public identities are assembled through collection and repetition of cultural fragments (at markets, in ballads, from pulpits, at court).

Webster would go on to contribute over thirty Character-sketches to the Overbury collection in 1615, but before that he once again experimented with theatrical Character-writing towards the beginning of his next play, *The Duchess of Malfi* (c.1614). Speaking aside to Delio during a busy court scene, Antonio delineates the "inward character" (I.i.157) of the onstage Duchess and her brothers (I.i.156-209), presenting them—with a nod to Joseph Hall's medal analogy—as "three fair medals / Cast in one figure, of so different temper" (I.i.188-89). Antonio completes his monumentalizing Character-sketch of the Duchess when Delio gently mocks his excessive praise:

ANTONIO. Let all sweet ladies break their flatt'ring glasses,
And dress themselves in her.

DELIO. Fie, Antonio,
You play the wire drawer with her commendations.

ANTONIO. I'll case the picture up only thus much.

All her particular worth grows to this sum:

She stains the time past, lights the time to come. (1.1.205-9)

Antonio the picture-maker shapes a Character for the Duchess, who is on stage but does not speak her first words in the play until shortly after her sketch is complete. This moment, indeed the play's presentation of the Duchess more generally, is imbricated with Webster's own picture-making beyond the play, particularly his Charactering of princes and widows. Webster's 1613 elegy on the late Prince Henry in *The Monumental Column*, which embeds a "Character of *Edward* the blacke Prince," envisions James I's son breaking from his tomb to

“Staine the time past, and light the time to come” (Gunby et al. 3.376, 383). His Character-diptych of “A Virtuous Widow” and “An Ordinary Widow” in the Overbury collection (Beecher 270-72) resonates with two opposing perspectives of the Duchess in the play. The Virtuous Widow, like the Duchess Charactered by Antonio, is “a mirror for our youngest dames to dress themselves by” (Beecher 271). The Ordinary Widow manifests vices that the Duchess’s brothers imagine in her. Most widows’ resolution not to marry, the Cardinal warns her, speaking like a Characterist, “lasts no longer / Than the turning of an hour-glass; the funeral sermon / And it both end together” (1.1.303-5). Yet Webster’s Duchess refuses to conform to either portrait: she is not the “lusty widow” (1.1.340) Ferdinand claims her to be, but neither is she the “relic” that is the Virtuous Widow, who buries her husband “in the worthiest monument that can be [...] her own heart” (Beecher 271). “This is flesh and blood, sir,” the Duchess tells a stunned Antonio after she has proposed to him, “’Tis not the figure cut in alabaster / Kneels at my husband’s tomb” (1.1.453-55). The Virtuous Widow, the Ordinary Widow: these Characters ’scape her, yet they are made of the same stuff as the rhetorical and ideological screens through which she is viewed in the play. The Duchess’s identity is formed in the theatre as she resists and exceeds these characterological parameters, navigating monumental markers of female virtue and vice that were signatures of the Characterist’s art. Character-writing was no fad for Webster, but rather integral to his innovations in tragic character.

In the early seventeenth century a new genre and rhetoric of character, associated with moral and social knowledge and with the commoditization of literary persons as units of cultural value, became embedded in early modern English culture. And it did so in part because “Character,” as a word and concept, was held up to public view in conjunction with the mesmerizing spectacle of putting women on trial, of arraigning and impugning the character of woman. As well as playing a formative role in drama and news culture, the neo-

Theophrastan Character was weaponized in pamphlet literature of the *querelle des femmes*,⁵³ a public debate about the nature and place of woman which intensified during and after the trials of Frances Howard and her accomplice Anne Turner. In *A Discourse Against Painting and Tincturing of Women* (1616), Thomas Tuke's reflection on sins exposed by the Overbury affair (49-56) is followed swiftly by "A Character of a Painted Woman," one who—similar to Hall's Hypocrite—"need[s] to be *twice defined*; for she is not that she seems" (57). Various deployed and augmented in the book trade, in the playhouse, and in news culture, the Character-sketch capitalized on a commercial desire for social information about the character of woman, packaged as compelling public instances—historical or fictional—like Vittoria Corombona and Frances Howard.

* * *

"A Character of the Author": The Shaper Shaped

Vittoria's reply echoes: "This character 'scapes me." Readers could refuse the moral and social knowledge that Character-sketches claimed to be offering. Yet this character has not 'scaped us. While the Character-sketch only flourished as a genre in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in England and on the European Continent, the rhetoric of character it developed was absorbed by other media and genres, from sermons to verse satire to the novel.⁵⁴ Jonathan Patterson has shown that in France, even before the publication of Jean de La Bruyère's *Les Caractères* in 1688, the statesman Jean-Baptiste Colbert incorporated Character-portraits of suspected individuals (composed by his observers or *intendants*) into his *Secret Files on the Personnel of all the Parlements and Sovereign Courts* (1663), shaping bureaucratic methodologies of spy and police networks.⁵⁵ As a cultural historian, one might

even flow forward from the inception of the English Character and its re-shaping of social information through to the rise of social media, avatars and digital culture, in which characters are “dispersed as packets of data that circulate through the porous membrane between self and environment” (Desmet, “Character” 541).⁵⁶ Yet if we trace the generic transformations of the English Character over the course of the seventeenth century, it becomes clear that the genre and its brand-name helped to shape the methodologies of the disciplines with which this article started, literary biography and literary history.

Following the success of the *Overbury Characters* in the 1610s, the genre of the Character-sketch continued to grow in popularity in the 1620s and 1630s, but in the 1640s and beyond distinctly new kinds of Character-sketches started to emerge. The Character-sketch was used as an ideological weapon during the Civil War, as royalists Charactered parliamentarians and vice versa, skewering figures such as libellers, rebels, hypocrites, turncoats, sectaries, and dissenting preachers (with specific targets often named).⁵⁷ There was also a shift toward narratives of individuals’ lives, as the historical and biographical Character portrait emerged,⁵⁸ giving us textual monuments of royal personages and “worthies” which exploited the capacity of virtue Character-writing to elevate and enshrine. Thomas Fuller’s *The Holy State* (1642), divided into “The Holy State” and “The Profane State,” pairs Character-sketches of types with “Lives” of historical and biblical figures, many of them prefaced by portraits engraved by William Marshall. The individuals are presented as “pattern[s]” or “president[s]” (E2r, L2v) of the Characters they follow. The life of Thomas Wolsey follows the Character of “The Favourite,” Paracelsus “The good Physician” (H3r-I2r), William Cecil Burleigh “The wise Statesman” (L11r-Mm3v), and so on. The framework facilitates and directs the impulse to map Characters onto real people.

It was a small leap from historical Character-portraits to Characters of authors in works of literary biography and literary history. Ben Jonson, ahead of the game once again,

had made a monumental mockery of the author of *Coryats Crudities* (1611), contributing to the book's panegyrics a prose "Character of the famous Odcomian, or rather Polytopian, Thomas the Coryate," followed by a "Characterism Acrostic" in verse (b1r-b4r). In time it was Jonson who would be Charactered by early literary historians and biographers, and almost always in the company of Shakespeare. Writing the first known biography of Shakespeare in print, in his *History of the Worthies of England* (1662), Thomas Fuller drew on his experience of Character-writing for *The Holy State*. *Worthies of England* features "the Characters of those worthy men" native to the counties covered, providing "examples" and "precedents" of "men famous for *Valour, Wealth, Wisedome, Learning, Religion, and Bounty*" (B1v), categorized—for example—as statesmen, physicians, soldiers, and writers. In his account of Shakespeare as a worthy of Warwickshire, Fuller frames "the *wit combates* betwixt him and *Ben Johnson*" as a battle between two Character-types, Jonson a "*Spanish great Gallion*" and Shakespeare an "*English man of War.*" While Jonson was "built far higher in Learning, *Solid*, but *Slow* in his performances," Shakespeare was "lesser in *bulk*, but lighter in *sailing*, could turn with all tides, tack about and take advantage of all winds, by the quickness of his Wit and Invention" (3Q3v; 126). The laboured metaphor of sailing is appropriate: the Character-type is the vessel, the person the instance. Characterized by their size and ability to navigate space, Shakespeare and Jonson fight for territory on the high seas of English literary history.

It was not only Thomas Fuller who turned to Character-writing when representing the lives of authors and situating them in literary history. It is often observed that John Dryden, in the 1660s, was the first person to use "character" to mean a "person portrayed in [...] drama" (*OED* n. 14). But Dryden also experimented with the neo-Theophrastan Character, including in his literary criticism. His *Essay of Dramatick Poesie* (1668) dramatizes a fictional debate among aristocratic friends about literature and theatre (ancient and modern,

English and Continental), set on a barge journeying down the Thames on the afternoon of 3 June 1665, the day of an English military victory in the Anglo-Dutch trade wars.⁵⁹ During a discussion of English drama, Dryden's mouthpiece, a figure called Neander, offers Character-sketches of several playwrights at the request of his friend Eugenius to "give us a Character of the author" (47) in preface of his examination of Jonson's comedy *Epicene, or The Silent Woman* (c.1610). In a passage that recalls Character-limning in Jonsonian comedy and Websterian tragedy, Neander Characters Shakespeare, Jonson, and—sketched together—Beaumont and Fletcher (47-50).⁶⁰ The Character of Jonson is a conquering king: "He invades Authours like a Monarch, and what would be theft in other poets, is onely victory in him" (49-50). But Neander's leading Character-sketch is reserved for a soulful Shakespeare:

To begin then with *Shakespeare*; he was the man who of all Modern, and perhaps Ancient Poets, had the largest and most comprehensive soul. All the Images of Nature were still present to him, and he drew them not laboriously, but luckily: when he describes any thing, you more than see it, you feel it too. Those who accuse him to have wanted learning, give him the greater commendation: he was naturally learn'd; he needed not the spectacles of Books to read Nature; he look'd inwards, and found her there. (47)

Looking inwards, the Shakespeare Charactered here anticipates the Shakespeare long privileged by character critics, a dramatist who changed the course of literary history by representing a space within, making his audiences and readers *feel* as they witness nature being drawn forth. Distinct from the masculinist Character of Jonson who victoriously invades authors, and from the Shakespeare who turns and tacks like an English man of war in Fuller's Character, this Shakespeare is a cultural monument of empathic creativity in touch with his feminine core: the Nature he reads within himself without need of books.

Appropriating a rhetoric of Character that has been shaped in dramatic contexts by Jonson,

Webster and Shakespeare himself, Dryden augments Shakespeare's authorial identity, giving him spatial and gendered dimensions that mark him out as an exemplary yet exceptional dramatist. Dryden's *Character* gives Shakespeare depth, presenting Shakespearean interiority as an other-worldly space located within the historical author himself (like the "deep wound" in Shakespeare that Greenblatt sees as generating Hamlet's "tormented inwardness"), but also accessible through his work, the cultural capital of which was crucial to Dryden's ambitions as a dramatist.⁶¹ The interior space that Dryden locates in Shakespeare, later central to Romantic character criticism and still highly valued in modern scholarship and culture, was first shaped using a genre and a rhetoric of *Character* that is now widely viewed as "non-Shakespearean."

This, of course, is just another story about the historical development of character in the early modern period. The narrative I have shaped is one of many possibilities which might put Shakespeare-centric histories in dialogue with the neglected cultural agency of "non-Shakespearean" models and practices of character. Such narratives are a means to interrogate the very notion of the "non-Shakespearean," a concept which is at once shapeless and shape-giving, the amorphous beyond against which Shakespeare holds his form in literary history. My alternative history, which inevitably bestows narrative space on certain persons, genres, practices, and cultural moments at the expense of others, seeks not to replace permanently one shape with another, to re-cast a "Shakespearean" early modern universe into—for instance—a stubbornly "Overburian" or "Websterian" mould. Rather it shows that alternating early modern history, un-shaping and re-shaping it, makes visible the characterological screens through which we view early modern culture, and through which

the early moderns increasingly viewed themselves. Always holding ghostly forms of the shapes it has been brought to bear, the history of character, whelp-like, is licked into new shapes by narratives that cast authors and other cultural agents as characters themselves.

NOTES

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¹ For Desmet, character “offers both method and data for the social drama by which identity or selfhood is formed,” and Theophrastan character-writing in particular “answers a persistent human need to place other persons, to cope with fears of the other, and to forge technologies for interacting with and ‘placing’ the other” (“Persistence” 54). Kunin, self-consciously reading literary history forward from the Character-books of the seventeenth century, argues that character is “a device that collects every example of a kind,” thereby “funnel[ing] whole societies of beings into shapes that are compact, elegant, manipulable, and portable” (37, 8). For Fallon, character is a form of parody that reveals even individuation, in life and in art, to be “a project of classification.”

² See *OED* character, n. 9, 15. I will later discuss the early Ben Jonson example given for 9a, dated 1600, which seems misplaced.

³ The centrality of *Hamlet* to the history of character has been reinforced—from different perspectives—in modern criticism by Barker, Maus, *Inwardness and Theater*, and Bloom, *Shakespeare*. For a critique of this tradition, see Emma Smith. On the significance of *Richard II* to the history of character, see McEachern, ch. 5, “Person: Shakespeare’s Reformed Characters” (183-224), and van Es, ch. 6, “Relational Drama” (109-24). On *King John* and especially the self-reflective Philip Faulconbridge, see Hirsch, and Slights.

Fineman argues that Shakespeare's sonnets invent poetic subjectivity insofar as they "inaugurate and give a name to the modernist literary self, thereby specifying for the future what will be the poetic psychology of the subject of representation" (29).

⁴ On the narrative treatment of Shakespeare's "character," and of Shakespeare as a character, in biographical and anecdotal writing, see Holland 21-29, and de Grazia 13-14.

⁵ Shapiro observes in his critique of modern Shakespeare biographies, including Greenblatt's *Will in the World*, that such books apply "the narrative structure and emotional power of the *bildungsroman*" (18).

⁶ Greenblatt ends his introduction to the third edition of *The Norton Shakespeare* by identifying Shakespeare's characters as his "secondary agents," in a passage that draws silently on Alfred Gell's anthropological theory of "distributed personhood" in *Art and Agency* (1998). "I think that throughout his career", Greenblatt writes, "Shakespeare produced in effect detachable parts of himself, parts that derived from his personhood (his social relationships, his acquired knowledge, his temperament, his memories, his inner life, and so forth) but that moved independently in the world." (Shakespeare 74)

⁷ Also see van Es (131-34), who argues that humoral comedy's "trend towards fixity and purgation is the very opposite of the trajectory in Shakespeare's drama in this period, where individual performers negotiate developmental arcs of increasing complexity" (132).

⁸ On Falstaff as a "round" character, see Marelj, ch. 1 (21-58). Marelj observes that "Falstaff's fatness, manifested by his bulging belly which exceeds his bodily frame, is a metonymy for the roundness or psychological reality that critics have attributed to him." (21-22)

⁹ See Lowe's introduction to her edition of Chapman's play on its generic and characterological innovativeness and influence as the first comedy of humours. Unless stated otherwise, all citations of plays by Shakespeare refer to *The Norton Shakespeare*.

¹⁰ Woloch focuses in particular on the nineteenth-century realist novel.

¹¹ I borrow Woloch's narratological categories here. The *character-space* is "that particular and charged encounter between an individual human personality and a determined space and position within the narrative as a whole," and the *character-system* is "the arrangement of multiple and differentiated character-spaces—differentiated configurations and manipulations of the human figure—into a unified narrative structure" (14). Also see Kunin's critique of Woloch's book (75-82).

¹² I borrow the verbs "magnify" and "turn away from" from Woloch's discussion of novelists' narrative treatment of fictional characters (313).

¹³ See Vickers on the rise of character criticism in Shakespeare studies in the late eighteenth century.

¹⁴ All references to this miscellany in its many different iterations are hereon to Beecher's edition.

¹⁵ On the authorship of the Overbury collection, see Beecher, "Appendix IV The Contributors to the Overbury Anthology" (116-28).

¹⁶ On the evidence for Webster's role as an author and probable editor in the sixth edition, see Gunby et al. 3.441-43, 454-56, and Forker 121-22. It is possible that Webster also "supervised the four editions of the characters that immediately preceded the sixth and perhaps even contributed to them" (Forker 122).

¹⁷ Beecher notes the view that Character-writing "belongs to an historical moment between feudalism and individualism when the quiddities of personhood were classified according to the socially constructed desires that motivated them" (35).

¹⁸ On the generic origins of the Overburian Character-sketch, see Beecher 31-56, and Boyce, *The Theophrastan Character*, ch. 3 (53-121).

¹⁹ My thinking here is indebted to Desmet, "Persistence." Desmet observes that Theophrastan Character-writing "models a rhetoric for reading people" (50) and "produc[es] in readers a tendency toward fear and loathing that is barely contained beneath a veneer of smug superiority" (52). Also see endnote 1.

²⁰ My thanks to Tiffany Stern for suggesting this example.

²¹ Also see the mocking note that follows Stephens' sketch of "A Pettifogging Aturny" (341).

²² In addition to the example illustrated in Figure 1, another numbered and cross-referenced manuscript index was added by an early reader, one "Thomas Alston," to the endpapers of a copy of the 13th edition of the Overbury collection (1628), held in the Folger Shakespeare Library (shelfmark STC 18916 copy 1).

²³ That readers were increasingly "encouraged to expect a character list in printed play-books" over the first half of the seventeenth century (Atkin and Smith 670) may well be connected to the rise of the Character-book. By the 1630s, when printed playbooks were more likely than not to include a character list (Atkin and Smith 649), the market for Character-books had reached a new high.

²⁴ All citations of Ben Jonson refer to the *Cambridge Edition*.

²⁵ For a discussion of Jonson's comic application of Theophrastan Character-writing, with a focus on *Volpone*, see Samuel Fallon's article in this special issue. Also see Womack 34-35, 53-58, and McCabe.

²⁶ *OED* character, n. Etymology.

²⁷ *OED* character, n. 1a, 2; characterism, n. 3; characterist, n. 1.

²⁸ Holland notes the introduction of these terms (8-9). See *OED* characterized, adj. (and n.), 1598+; characterical, adj., 1588+; characteristical, adj., 1588+; characterize, v., 1581+.

²⁹ On the long-term significance of this movement, see Fleming, who describes the “real” character as “a para-linguistic, and non-ambiguous, script of things” (8).

³⁰ I use the terms ‘brand’ and ‘branding’ because ‘Character’ was used in market contexts, but also because a literal meaning of ‘character’ in the early seventeenth century was a brand or stamp (*OED* character, n. 1). For ‘essay,’ see *OED* essay, n. 1a, 8.

³¹ Indeed, more generally, “[i]n the Renaissance, ‘character’ functioned primarily as a verb and secondarily as a noun” (Desmet, “Persistence” 47). See *OED* character v. for a variety of uses in early modern English, though it should be noted that the Theophrastan sense of the verb, to produce a Character-sketch of a thing, place or person, is not properly acknowledged; it is only vaguely suggested at v. 2 and 4. Similarly, the Theophrastan sense of the noun (suggested at *OED* character n. 12a, for which the earliest example is as late as 1645: “a description, delineation, or detailed report of a person’s qualities”) is strangely suppressed in the *OED*.

³² See Bos 155-57 on these kinds of Character-sketches.

³³ For discussions of a range of early modern dramatists’ engagement with Character-writing, see Boyce, *The Theophrastan Character* 306-14, and Smeed 199-224. The early uses of “Character” in Middleton’s *Revenge’s Tragedy* (1606; printed 1607), 1.1.5 and Middleton and Dekker’s *The Roaring Girl* (1611) Prologue.26-27 are striking for the manner in which they evoke the neo-Theophrastan paradigm in order to negotiate characterological expectations. Citations refer to *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*, gen. ed. Gary Taylor et John Lavagnino.

³⁴ This critical tendency has been challenged recently. On Shakespeare’s dramatic appropriation of Character-writing, see Berg on *All’s Well That Ends Well* (c.1603), and Kunin on *The Merchant of Venice* (c.1596), 38-42.

³⁵ See Newman 46-48.

³⁶ Belsey approaches this way of thinking about Iago when reading him as an essayist in the tradition of Montaignian scepticism, one who “cloaks racial hatred in casual indifference” by appropriating the style of the essayists: “terse, prosaic, forthright” (Belsey 171, 166). Engaging with the Theophrastan tradition, Altman sees Iago—“the connoisseur of probabilities” (7)—not as a Characterist, but as a dramatic analogue of the “The Ironist,” one of the Characters in Theophrastus’ original collection (60).

³⁷ All citations of *Othello* refer to Michael Neill’s edition.

³⁸ *OED* character n. 2, ensign n. 3, 4.

³⁹ His last words, after his villainy is exposed, confound any desire for consummate knowledge of the Characterist himself: “Demand me nothing: what you know, you know” (5.2.301).

⁴⁰ Ian Smith, “White Skin, Black Masks” 33-36. Also see Ian Smith, “Othello’s Black Handkerchief” on the use of black cloth as an “epidermal prosthesis” in the early modern theatre, where it “defines and determines a notion of racial subjectivity” (4).

⁴¹ I am thinking here not only of the material staging of Othello’s blackness, discussed by Ian Smith, but also of the full title of the play, *Othello, the Moor of Venice*, and the description of him as “the Moore” in the terminal character list in the First Folio of 1623. Iago’s Character-typing of Othello as the Moor, as when he tells Roderigo “These Moors are changeable in their wills” (1.3.340-41), is thus disturbingly invested with paratextual authority.

⁴² Grier writes that in early modern literature “[t]he black character served as a moor, indeed, a referential anchor that, in a world of shifting contexts and intentional forgeries, might be relied upon.” (196) My thinking is also indebted to Curran Jr., who discusses the way in which Iago contaminates others with a generalizing logic (63-64).

⁴³ See Pettegree 182-207 on the rise of news-sheets and news-books.

⁴⁴ I draw here and elsewhere on the detailed discussions of the Overbury scandal, and its social and political significance, in Bellany, and Lindley. See especially Bellany, ch. 2 on “News Culture and the Overbury affair” (74-135).

⁴⁵ Examples include a broadside poem by Samuel Rowlands called *The Poysoned Knights Complaint* (1615/1616?), the anonymous *Bloody Downfall of Adultery, Murder, Ambition* (1615/1616?), and Richard Niccols’ *Sir Thomas Ouerburies Vision* (1616). See Bellany 282-83 for an extended list.

⁴⁶ On connections and contrasts between Frances Howard and Webster’s Vittoria, see Lindley 5, 184-85, and Rosalind and Stallybrass 84-85.

⁴⁷ On Webster’s dramatic use of Theophrastan Character-writing, also see Robinson’s introduction to *The White Devil* 16-21, Gunby et al. 3.442-44, and Curran Jr. 30-48.

⁴⁸ On the use of criminal branding as an administrative imprint across early modern Europe, see Dauge-Roth, ch. 5, “Stigma and State Control: Branding the Deviant Body” (217-56). She observes that “State-sanctioned criminal branding was practiced widely across Europe, the brand taking on diverse shapes according to the political power that made it” (17).

⁴⁹ Dekker probably authored the six prison Characters added to the ninth edition of the Overbury collection in 1616 (Beecher 118-19, 283-93). Also see Geffray Minshull's *Characters and Essayes and Characters of a Prison and Prisoners* (1618). Webster sketched "A Pirate" and "A Devilish Usurer" for the Overbury collection in 1615 (Beecher 249-50, 266-68).

⁵⁰ As noted in Q3 of *The White Devil*, these Character-books included the second edition of Richard Flecknoe's *Sixty-Nine Enigmatical Characters* (1665), published by Crooke, and recent editions of *Overbury's Characters* (1664) and *Earl's Characters* (1664), published by Playfere. See Webster, *The White Devil* 96-97.

⁵¹ "Scire velis quid sit mulier? Quo percitet oestro?" The translation is provided by Robinson in his edition (98-99).

⁵² As David Gunby observes, "Webster severely limits her stage appearances, offering different facets of her personality each time she does appear. [...] Webster seems, in fact, to be working in a fashion quite consciously disjunctive in his presentation of Vittoria." (Gunby et al., 1.59)

⁵³ On the *querelle des femmes* in England, see Woodbridge, who characterizes the controversy as "largely a literary game" (6).

⁵⁴ On the long literary history and enduring influence of the Character-sketch, see Boyce, *The Theophrastan Character*; Smeed; and Venturo. Also see Garber, who argues that the Theophrastan Character "influenced the development of later fiction and drama, and remains sharply pertinent in psychology, journalism, cartoon art, and popular culture" (394).

⁵⁵ My thanks to Jonathan Patterson for sending me his paper, "Colbert's Police Files: The Materials of Bureaucratic Character in Seventeenth-Century France," presented at the conference "An Anatomy of England: Material Culture in Early Modern Character Sketches" (Université de Versailles Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines, 8 November 2019). I am also grateful to the organiser of this excellent conference, Anne Geoffrey. See Plantié on the development of different kinds of literary portraiture and Character-writing in France in the mid-to-late seventeenth century.

⁵⁶ Desmet's theorization of Shakespearean character in the digital age draws on the Theophrastan Character as "a paradigm for how Renaissance characters are mediated through rhetorical screens," claiming that the genre's "emphasis on rhetorical structures as embodied mediators between literary characters and audiences will prove central to Shakespearean character in the computer age" ("Character" 540). Also see Shimizu on connections between Overburian Characters and digital avatars.

⁵⁷ See, for example, John Cleveland's *Character of a London Diurnal* (1644) and Thomas Ford's *The Times Anatomized, in Seuerall Characters* (1647). Boyce discusses this phase in the history of the Character-sketch in *The Polemic Character, 1640-1661*. I am grateful to Steven Zwicker for sharing his keynote lecture on the role of Character-writing in the poetic careers of Andrew Marvell and John Dryden, "Written on the Body: Satiric Characters and the Corporal Imagination," presented at the conference "An Anatomy of England: Material Culture in Early Modern Character Sketches" (Université de Versailles Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines, 8 November 2019). Zwicker observes that "the verbal and physical violence of the civil wars had a decisive impact on the earlier tradition of moralizing abstractions as character writing turned partisan and polemical."

⁵⁸ See Boyce, *The Theophrastan Character* 302-4, and Ventura 561-62.

⁵⁹ Steven Zwicker discusses the theatricality of Dryden's *Essay* in his recent Oxford University Press edition of Dryden's selected writings. My thanks to him for generously sharing his introduction to the text prior to publication. The *Essay*, Zwicker writes, is "a kind of stage play, a self-conscious piece of verisimilar action, unified in time and place—one afternoon on a barge on the Thames—and fashioned like the plays of Corneille as 'so many declamations'."

⁶⁰ Neander's Charactering of authors is strikingly Jonsonian in its method of setting up audience expectations of a dramatic character. Once we have been given a Character of Jonson, the author enters the discussion in the form of Neander's favourite play: "Having thus spoken of the Authour, I proceed to the examination of his Comedy, *The Silent Woman*" (50). During this examination of *Epicene*, Neander praises Jonson's method of giving "Pictures" of characters before they enter, noting the examples of Daw, Lafoole, Morose, and the Ladies Collegiates, "So that before they come upon the Stage you have a longing expectation of them, [...] and when they are there [...] nothing of their humour is lost to you." (54-55) In the play, the accuracy of Dauphine's Character-sketch of Jack Daw as a foolish suitor (1.3.10-14) is explicitly noted for the audience after Daw has appeared in person and fulfilled his Character:

CLERIMONT. Was not the character right of him?

DAUPHINE. As could be made, i'faith. (*Epicene* 2.3.63-64)

⁶¹ Dryden and Davenant's adaptation of Shakespeare's *Tempest*, *The Enchanted Island* (1670), was produced in 1667, and included a long prologue by Dryden which emphasised the importance of "*the drops which fell from Shakespeare's pen*" to the historical development of English drama (A4r).

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