Editors' Column: Introduction to "Character and Character Studies"

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WE ASK FOR YOUR INDULGENCE as we introduce this special issue by adapting the format of the popular American quiz show, Jeopardy. The show works not by asking quiz questions but rather by listing answers within a general category such as “World Capitals.” Contestants supply the questions, and if they’re correct, they win a certain amount of money. So, readers, your category is “Special Issues of Narrative,” and you’re playing for bragging rights. The answer is:

Transmedia characters, player characters, pre-narrative figures, voice assistants, literary characters, and characters without signifiers. Games, film, prose fiction, political journalism, and Artificial Intelligence. Authors, designers, readers, viewers, fans, and users. Formal, political, semiotic, transmedial, rhetorical, and historical analyses.

The correct question is “What are the objects and methods of study in the special issue on Character and Character Studies?” (Honor system: did you earn bragging rights?)

Whimsy aside, this special issue is dedicated to the interdisciplinary study of ‘character.’ Characters are a fascinating phenomenon to study but hard to explain in an introduction alone. So, we begin this way to highlight several takeaways from the issue:

1. Character is a core concept of narrative, but it is not a single phenomenon, not something that can be adequately captured by one definition that perfectly fits all of its manifestations.
2. At the same time, it is productive to consider character as an overarching concept akin to a large circus tent under which these multiple objects of study sometimes interact and sometimes go their separate ways. Such consideration ultimately leads to a richer understanding of the objects than consigning each to its own media-specific tent. Such consideration also exposes the limitations of any claim along the lines of “only X counts as character and everything else should be banished from the Domain of Character Theory.”
3. Similarly, juxtaposing the various methods for analyzing these objects of study both allows each method to show what it can do and positions you readers to undertake your own comparisons and contrasts.

In order to further facilitate your reading for comparisons and contrasts, we have also adopted a distinctive format for this issue, one that puts a premium on Dialogue. We have ten groups of essays authored by twenty scholars with three essays in each group. In each group, a scholar articulates a position in the initial essay, another scholar responds in the second essay, and the first scholar offers their reply. Thus, for example, in the first group “Transmedia Characters,” Jan-Nöel Thon leads off with “Transmedia Characters/Transmedia Figures: Drawing Distinctions and Staging Re-Entries.” Roberta Pearson responds with “The Mutable Holmes,” and Jan-Nöel rounds off the Dialogue with his “Reply.”

This format, we believe, has fostered provocative proposals, smart responses and replies of the “yes, but” and “yes, and” variety with the result that the exchanges provide the bases for further Dialogue. In this way, we regard the special issue not as resolving all the questions about character our contributors raise but rather as setting one rich agenda for further discussion and debate.

Finally, we want to express our gratitude: First, to Espen Aarseth of the IT University of Copenhagen, who garnered funds from the European Research Council, for a conference on Character Studies in November of 2019 that launched the work of this special issue. Second, to all our contributors: in addition to Jan-Noel, Roberta, and Espen, they are Hans-Joachim Backe, Paolo Bertetti, Ida Broni Christensen, Shane Denson, Elizabeth Evans, John Frow, Kristine Jørgensen, Veli-Matti Karhulahti, Nicolle Lamerichs, Petri Lankoski, Kai Mikkonen, Nieves Rosendo, Mattia Thibault, Susana Tosca, and Lukas R. A. Wilde.

The excellence of their work has been matched by that of their collegiality. We are grateful for the opportunity to have worked with all of them.

—Joleen Blom and James Phelan