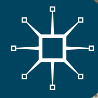

Character and Caricature, 1660–1820

Edited by
Jennifer Buckley
Montana Davies-Shuck

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The starting point for this project can be traced to idle conversations over coffee in the attic office in King's Manor, which forms part of the Centre for Eighteenth Century Studies at the University of York. Our shared interest in elements of character subsequently gave rise to a conference at Northumbria University from which the essays in this collection owe their origins. All of the speakers and respondents at this event have played a vital role in shaping the final contents of this volume, and without them this collection simply would not exist.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Configuring Character and Caricature

Jennifer Buckley and Montana Davies-Shuck

Henry Fielding proposes in his 1743 'Essay on the Knowledge of the Characters of Men' that "[w]e take the Colour of a Man's Actions not from their own visible Tendency, but from his public Character" (Fielding 1743, 1:198). A man's character, Fielding suggests, is the result of what "others say of him, in Opposition to what we see him do" (Fielding 1743, 1:198). Words and perceptions speak louder than actions as we "suffer ourselves to be deceived, out of the Credit of a Fact, or out of a just Opinion of its Heinousness, by the reputed Dignity or Honesty of the Person who did it" (Fielding 1743, 1:198–99). Put simply, a person's character is determined by how they present themselves to the world—through dress, mannerisms, the company kept, and affectations in speech and behaviour. Hence, if one was perceived as outwardly having a virtuous character there was the potential to, almost literally, get away with murder, if the committal of the most heinous crime would require actions that

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were 'out of character'. Yet, as Samuel Johnson noted in issue four of *The Rambler* (1752), no character was without fault and every character contained non-virtuous elements. Every man's character needed to be carefully read and deciphered to prevent a desensitisation to traits that ought not to be emulated or encouraged:

> It is therefore not a sufficient vindication of a character, that it is drawn as it appears; for many characters ought never to be drawn: nor of a narrative, that the train of events is agreeable to observation and experience; for that observation which is called knowledge of the world, will be found much more frequently to make men cunning than good. [...] Many writers, for the sake of following nature, so mingle good and bad qualities in their principal personages, that they are both equally conspicuous; and as we accompany them through their adventures with delight, and are led by degrees to interest ourselves in their favour, we lose the abhorrence of their faults, because they do not hinder our pleasure. (Johnson 1969, 22–23)

Reading tales of cunning characters has the potential to teach slyness, stories of rakes might encourage sexual deviance, and accounts of alcoholics promote spending too much time in the tavern. For Johnson at least, there is a fear about life coming to imitate art. If society became desensitised to deviant characteristics in literature, history, and art, the consequences could be dire.

Literary endeavour in the eighteenth century was increasingly concerned with character and identity, with new genres opening up alternative frameworks within which selfhood could be "examined, popularized, and visually presented in new ways" (West 2018, 110). The examination of selfhood involved the scrutiny of others, in particular through the rise of celebrity culture, which made actors and politicians seem accessible to the wider public on an intimate level. Character thus became personal and readily consumable; famous portraits adorned everything from print shop windows to textiles and pottery; ventriloquist narrators or eidolons in essay-periodicals become 'real' personalities; and dramatic monologues gave glimpses into the interior world of fictional characters and the real performers who embodied them. Each of these manifestations of character offers a glimpse below the surface and an opportunity to get to know the individual beneath the public veneer—warts and all.

Considering the development of selfhood, this volume addresses how character became increasingly interlinked with notions of caricature over

the course of the eighteenth century. In spanning the years 1660–1820, the volume has two main aims: first, to reassess the importance of character as a precondition for caricature and, second, to critically examine the various media through which character was constructed in a period when the production of print and visual satire increased exponentially. The chapters take an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approach that encompasses disability studies, cultural materialism, gender studies and the history of sexuality, spatial theory, and performance studies. Adopting a range of theoretical approaches, our contributors develop a core theory for the study of character: the nuances and origins of caricature can only be appreciated once we understand the genre's prehistory and relationship to character. As Julie Park suggests, new literary genres and visual media equipped the inhabitants of eighteenth-century Britain with "new tools for devising novel versions of the self" (Park 2009, xiii), and the chapters accordingly use a variety of source material, revealing how character results from continual interactions between a myriad of cultural and philosophical influences. Character, as Elaine McGirr contends in her afterword, is a transmedia, overfreighted, and paradoxical concept that is fixed and yet ephemeral, and subject to multiple readings through different critical lenses. Capable of being put on and off at will, character is perhaps the ultimate fiction and is one that we are all entangled in.

While it evolves over time, character also evolves thematically and so, while this volume moves chronologically to develop a historicised narrative about the evolution of character, the connections between the chapters run deeper; thematic strands emerge relating to gender, print culture, theatrical performance, and the curation of identity. This second connecting thread facilitates a deeper focus on specific facets and iterations of characterologies to reveal the sophistication of character, its vexed qualities, and its (inevitable) movement towards caricature. These twin ways of approaching the volume reveal the interconnectedness of character and how an individual's characteristics can be made malleable over time—even if specific behavioural traits are only suppressed in certain circumstances and rarely removed entirely. Character gets to the heart of what it is to account for oneself and one's place in the world, and this volume seeks to shed light on character development in a moment when concepts of selfhood and identity began to assume many of the forms that they take to this day.

Forming Character

'Character' is a notoriously slippery term that refers to the "representations of a man as to his personal qualities" and which traces its origins to the Greek word *kharasso*—a mark or stamp made upon the page which, when made in quantity, constitute written language and inform the construction of the mind (Klein 1994, 91). Both meanings were in circulation in the eighteenth century, with the actor and playwright Charles Macklin playfully observing: "What is character? The alphabet will tell you. It is that which is distinguished by its own marks from every other thing of its kind" (Kirkman 1799, 366). For literary studies, this connection between character and letterpress printing highlights, in Park's words, "the tactile properties of fiction, derived from fingere, a fabricating of the mind and the hands, [that] resonated both in the making of eighteenth-century novels and with human subjects" (Park 2009, xviii). But this is not the sole model for character inherited from classical antiquity, nor is the tactile, characterising quality of fiction that Park describes confined to those characters found in the period's novels.

The art of 'character writing' is of Greek origin, dating back to c.319 BC when the philosopher Theophrastus published his work *On Moral Characters*. Theophrastan characters are short sketches of foolish or vicious types of people, designed to teach readers how to interpret and react to stock figures such as the flatterer, coward, and newsmonger. The sketches provided a framework for how readers could think about their neighbours—and themselves. This didactic genre acquired a new valency in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, undergoing a revival following the accession of James I as the British nation sought to redefine and re-characterise itself, both at home and abroad. Character sketches played a vital part in the formation of national identities by teaching contemporary readers how to interpret the society that produced the behaviours they saw in their fellow citizens. The neo-Theophrastan mode of character writing, however, was not confined to people; it was expanded to explore the character of individuals and the urban environment as mutually informing concerns.[1] Exploring this new model for character sketching within this volume, Jennifer Buckley's chapter addresses the relationship between person and place with regard to the period's quintessential social space: the coffeehouse. Character sketching became not just a means of

[1] For more on the relationship between character formation and the urban environment, see: Squibbs (2014).

identifying types of behaviour, but of debating the use of social spaces and how patrons ought to behave within them.

While character writing enjoyed a resurgence in the seventeenth century following the publication of works by Joseph Hall (1608), Sir Thomas Overbury (1613), and John Earle (1628), the definition of 'character' was also beginning to shift as a result of philosophical enquiries into selfhood. Seventeenth-century philosophers expanded the character sketches' interest in internal versus external manifestations of the self through their enquiries into the body, soul, and consciousness. René Descartes posited in 1649 that man is a 'machine' made up of four distinct parts—the body, the immaterial soul, passions, and actions—that work together to shape personal identity. Theorising that the soul acts directly upon the physical body, Descartes proposed that "we ought to think that what is a Passion in the former [soul] is commonly an Action in the latter [body]" (Descartes 1989, 19). Cartesian theory laid the foundations from which successive generations of philosophers would further explore the reciprocal relationship between internal and external qualities. These future scholars included John Locke, whose *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689) distinguishes between the identity of a person and the notion of personal identity. The latter, he suggested, arises from the individual's consciousness:

> [S]ince consciousness always accompanies thinking, and it is that that makes everyone to be what he calls himself, and thereby distinguishes himself from all other thinking things, in this alone consists personal identity, i.e. the sameness of a rational being; and as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person. (Locke 1964, 212)

Our sense of self is shaped by and contingent on our memories. In other words, character is consciously and carefully wrought as a direct result of lived experiences. Exploring these concerns, Declan Kavanagh's contribution to this collection engages with character as something that is both physically embodied and internally constructed. Using the figure of the libertine as a lens through which to rethink impaired embodiment and the prehistory of disability, Kavanagh examines the poetry of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, to develop Tobin Siebers' argument that "at best, the body is a vehicle, the means by which we convey who we are from place to place" (Siebers 2008, 7). Kavanagh's reading of the debilitated libertine body draws on the concept of self-consciousness outlined by Locke,

arguing for the debilitated body as a contested site that is defined through the collision of external forces and deep-rooted, internal conflictual desires.

The internal, self-conscious aspect of character, however, perplexes attempts to seek out a universal definition for 'character'; based on interiority, characters exist at the level of 'me', 'myself', and 'I'. David Hume captured this problem in an often-quoted observation from 1739: "[W]hen I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception" (Hume 2000, 165). The self is amorphous—being at once fixed and continually in flux, reacting to external stimuli such as emotion and sensation, but also the company of others. When defining the character of a polite gentleman, Anthony Ashley Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury, observed how "we polish one another and rub off our corners and rough sides by a sort of amicable collision" (Shaftesbury 1999, 31). This is a more emollient version of the "collision of mind with mind" (Godwin 1993, 3:15) that William Godwin would identify as central to interaction with others later in the century, though, in both instances character is created through an abrasive, polishing effect. One's public-facing self is formed through exposure to the ideologies and experiences of others.

Further frustrating Hume's attempt to capture the pure self is the impossibility of untangling the individual character from the conditions under which it was formed and, in particular, from national characteristics:

> The human mind is of a very imitative nature; nor is it possible for any set of men to converse often together, without acquiring a similitude of manners, and communicating to each other their vices as well as virtues. […] Where a number of men are united into one political body, the occasions of their intercourse must be so frequent for defence, commerce, and government, that, together with the same speech or language, they must acquire a resemblance in their manners, and have a common or national character, as well as a personal one, peculiar to each individual. (Hume 1993, 115)

Government, conversation, language, and living conditions all contribute to the emergence of shared character traits within large groups of people. Against the backdrop of Scottish Union in 1707 and the succession of the Hanoverian monarchy to the British throne in 1714, the tension between

national and personal identities took on a new urgency. As a Scot, Hume was particularly attuned to the dangers of nationalism, whereby "the vulgar are apt to carry all *national characters* to extremes", while also finding the English nation to be devoid of character:

> [T]he ENGLISH government is a mixture of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. The people in authority are composed of gentry and merchants. All sects of religion are to be found among them; and the great liberty and independency which every man enjoys, allows him to display the manners peculiar to him. Hence the ENGLISH, of any people in the universe, have the least of a national character, unless this very singularity may pass for such. (Hume 1993, 119)

Hume's discussion of an English, not a British character, is striking and indicates the challenges of forming a cohesive sense of identity for the post-union nation. As the country lacks a set identity so too do its people for, as Michael Billig notes of the twentieth-century nation-state, "identity is to be found in the embodied habits of social life" (Billig 1995, 8). Entrenched, embodied habits are not formed overnight or developed upon the signing of border legislation. They grow more slowly as a result of shared sensibilities and collective uses of language, often based on political affiliations and membership of societies, clubs, and nations. A national character is hard won and Linda Colley, in her study of the formation of British identity, argues that prolonged military conflict facilitated the formation of a British sense of character by the end of the eighteenth century. She proposes that Britishness is formed through interactions with 'the Other', especially Frenchness: "Time and time again, war with France brought Britons, whether they hailed from Wales or Scotland or England, into confrontation with an obviously hostile Other and encouraged them to define themselves collectively against it" (Colley 1992, 5). English character has a chameleon, agglomerate quality, responding to not only its changing borders and growing colonial influences, but also the permeability of its domestic borders. Subject to internal and external influences, no two national characters or set of characteristics are the same—as Montana Davies-Shuck's contribution here reveals through an exploration of the fop. With fears of Englishmen aping French fashions, simian images became a key part of exploring anxieties over England's relationship with France. The fop is a key site for contesting ideals of British masculinity, continually held in contrast to its non-French counterparts: the macaroni, rake, dandy, and cit.

Towards a Theory of Character

The field of characterologies has been evolving within eighteenth-century studies over the past three decades since the publication of *The Economy of Character* (1998). Deidre Shauna Lynch's study refocused eighteenth-century scholars on the question of character in the novel, positing that there is a noticeable shift from the "flat characters" of the early eighteenth century to the "rounded characters" of later novels (Lynch 1998, 126). Viewing identity in terms of inner and outer qualities became commonplace in the eighteenth century; the body-soul configuration of the self endured, but an alternative model emerged in which selfhood was articulated through deportment—be that in terms of dress, mannerisms, or a more general moral code. This external showing enabled character to become more embodied, moving away from the flat models of Theophrastus into the more rounded, believable figures of the late eighteenth-century novel with whom readers could imagine interacting on the street. The movement from flat to round recalls E.M. Forster's influential argument: "The test of a round character is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way. If it never surprises, it is flat. If it does not convince, it is a flat pretending to be round" (Forster 1927, 48). Rather than restaging this argument, Lynch addresses what it *means* to be rounded and ultimately how self-awareness results from a social identity and social context, whereby a reader's engagement with character became a "profoundly social experience" (Lynch 1998, 20).

Reading and understanding an individual's character through the way they presented themselves, or were presented by others, was part of the characterising methods found in everything from the novel to legal trials and tradesmen's advertisements. In each instance, character is observable, fixed, and a measure of worth; as Lisa Freeman reminds us, character designates a form of truth and, in its broadest sense, encompasses "the sum of moral and mental qualities which distinguish an individual or a race, viewed as a homogeneous whole; the individuality impressed by nature and habit on man or nation; mental or moral constitution" (Freeman 2002, 22). Thus, legal trials call witnesses to defend the accused's character and the "good Character" of an individual is testament to their trustworthiness. A meritorious character placed you in good stead and lent truth to whatever you claimed—after all, it is on account of the "good Character she had from her youth" that Daniel Defoe, for example, would have us believe that Mrs Bargrave really did see the ghost of Mrs Veal