Introduction: Dramatis Personae

Dramatic character is among the most long-standing and, by now, most familiar of artistic phenomena. In the ancient world, certainly, characterization was not conceived or understood as it is today, yet the onset of mimetic representations of persons through enactment – or, more elaborately, a dramatis personae conveyed through storytelling by performers before an audience – dates to the sixth-century B.C. in Greece. Evolving from the discoveries of that ancient populace and its theatre, characters in drama have conveyed their personalities, interrelations, and life histories under vastly contrasting circumstances: in different eras and cultures, on all manner of stages, and before widely disparate audiences in many languages. Today, we are so accustomed to the telling of stories and the portrayal of fictional persons through characterization and acting – on stage, on television, or in film – that dramatic characters can seem to be everywhere, and our ability to know and appreciate these fictive personages has long since come to be second nature. At the same time, though, such characterization is dependent, as it has always been, upon a magnificent, if necessarily disguised, trick of theatrical art.

Character, indeed, is a basis for the theatrical illusion itself – that is, the enacted pretense that a group of onlookers, in a collective accommodation of skepticism or disbelief, is pleased to accept as representative and truthful. To this end, the conjuring of a dramatist is focused on the persuasive delivery of a stage figure's lifelikeness, but not of completeness. The entirety of a dramatic character, comprising all that an audience must know in order for a play to function optimally and be comprehended in performance, must be conveyed within a conventional two or three hours of stage time, a strict but necessary limitation on the background information that can belong to any member of the cast. And yet, what would appear to be missing, those nonessential elements of background and experience that must be omitted in the stage presentation of personhood, go largely unnoticed by the observer.

An audience, willingly assistant in the playwright's legerdemain, tends to helpfully yet unconsciously fill in the blanks in characterization.[1] Thus, the observer is led to experience what is perceived through spectatorship as fully drawn stage personas that are complete with current activities and concerns as well as possibly intricate pasts that might well reflect an audience member's own life – or at least be accepted as plausibly so. Does it matter that a theatrical character once learned to ride a horse or a motorcycle or that he or she attended third grade or was ill at times with cold or flu? Perhaps so and perhaps not, but the spectator can assume such background as one might of most anyone, and without being told by the playwright. In literary narrative, by contrast, authors can describe at will and at length, editorial or budgetary considerations aside.

Indeed, this transaction between audience member and dramatic character is a qualitatively different means of engagement from that of a reader with characters in a novel or short story. The physical presence and immediacy of the actor, whose embodiment of a theatrical character is, by definition, abbreviated and made succinct by the limit on performance time, aids tremendously in an audience's ability to perceive both completeness and roundedness in the representation of a character in a play – that is, a fully realized stage figure. The observer is encouraged, ideally, to accept the depiction of character as reliable, and to behold therefore a person on the stage, as opposed to in the mind's eye of the reader. Or, to put this slightly differently, the audience collaborates with both the dramatist and the actor toward an artful thoroughness of depiction and reception.[2]

In this sense at least, dramatic character becomes a collaboration, even a fusion, between the design of the dramatist and the actor's own interpretation as created for performance and apprehended by onlookers. And clearly, the nature and composition of a theatrical audience are, in themselves, highly variable phenomena. Spectators in differing historical periods and geographical locales are distinguished and differentiated by factors as various as gender, race, class, or economic status, cultural manners and mores, civic or national traditions, or simply the popular trends of a particular day. That said, the collaboration to which I refer speaks specifically but also broadly to what is aesthetically basic in theatrical art and pertains fundamentally to the engagement of an observer with a story that is enacted through characterization. In fact, the relation of an audience to a play and to the performance of character has its own creative and protean aspects. An audience is not, one hopes, passive in the face of an artful portrayal but is, rather, drawn emotionally and intellectually to enter into partnership with the representation, whatever it may be. Herbert Blau

speaks to exactly this proclivity when he observes that an audience "is not so much a mere congregation of people as a body of thought and desire. It does not exist before the play but is *initiated* or *precipitated* by it; it is not an entity to begin with but a consciousness constructed. The audience is what happens when, performing the signs and passwords of a play, something postulates itself and unfolds in response" (25, italics original). What Blau does not say is that a goodly part of these interactive dynamics belongs to the volatile relation between observer and those who are observed – the enacted characters who inhabit a given play at a particular time and before an assemblage.

This collaborative interaction, which occurs naturally but often unconsciously on the part of audiences, and which is by now so routinely familiar, has a genesis that is anything but commonplace. From a contemporary perspective, in fact, the beginnings of theatrical characterization are, though by no means inscrutable, extraordinarily foreign and distant to a modern sensibility. There is, to be sure, a relatively straightforward and conventional way of deciphering these beginnings. Within the Aristotelian tradition at least, it is believed that the birth of character in drama took place in the ancient world as part of an early development of tragedy, sixth century B.C., when the Greek tragedian and choral leader Thespis became not only a solo performer but also an actor, one who assumed a role in mask – perhaps that of a mythic hero or the figure of Pentheus or even the god Dionysus (although this is disputed) – and interacted with the chorus of fifty men who sang the dithyramb in the god's honor.[3] While the specifics of this impersonation remain in question, it is precisely this phenomenon, the depiction by a performer of an individual other than himself, deity or not, that is associated typically with the beginnings of Greek tragedy and also of acting – when the latter term is understood simply as a person's enactment of a fictive persona that is observed by others in the service of storytelling. Here, within this elemental relation of personal imitation to collective observation, dramatic character emerges also and concurrently as a variety of artistic representation that was heretofore unknown. The concept of an embodied fiction – that is, the visible manifestation of a personage other than the performer as a figure within a story – was, in the ancient Greek setting, radically new in spite of the Homeric tradition of orally presented poetic narrative that preceded it.

In addition, the exotic nature of the deity who was celebrated in the dithyramb – the changeable god Dionysus – taken together with the religious and performative aspects associated with the dithyrambic ceremony itself, add immeasurably to the complexity and fascination of this

initial onset of theatrical character.[4] To refer to Dionysus as a god is accurate, certainly, in terms of his status in the Greek world and his range of religious associations and visual forms. The god appears often, as on a calyx krater, as a robed and bearded figure with thyrsus, but also, as in Euripides's *Bacchae*, as a smiling young man with blonde curls, or in such varied manifestations as a bull, lion, snake, the Stranger, Traveller, or fire.[5] And yet, even when one considers the phenomenon of the Dionysiac apart from ancient religious beliefs – as a set of ideas rather than something metaphysical or supernatural – this figure still evinces a remarkable intricacy and, in fact, a strangeness. Dionysus is, after all, famously paradoxical, a personified union of contradictions and oppositions.[6] With respect to theatre specifically, Dionysus is preeminently the god of the mask, of acting as theatrical illusion and representation as well as impersonation, and hence of dramatic characterization in its initial appearances. Or, perhaps more accurately, he is the god *within* such phenomena, the spirit that gives rise to them, singly and in combination. The significance and impact of this generative theatrical spirit are such that I begin my inquiry into dramatic character and its dramaturgy with "The Art of Dionysus" (Chapter 1), examining this unique figure's spectrum of associations with theatrical art in its moments of genesis. Dionysus stands, in this connection, not only for a religious conception but also for seminal ideas that led to characterization as a fictional impersonation that is given body and speech within a performance space and before a collective body.

Under these very circumstances, the onset of theatrical characterization is connected directly to the development of a play's overall design and dramatic shape, dating to early tragedy. Ancient dramaturgy, in its relationship to play structure and based initially upon a succession of exchanges between the individual performer and a chorus, developed in the case of tragic drama into a structural alternation of episode and choric ode, or stasimon, beginning often with a *prologos* and *parodos* and ending with the *exodos* of the chorus. For the ancient Greek dramatist and audience, this established a template for dramatic interaction that was supremely effective in placing an individual and a group in concert or in opposition, a pattern that found its analog, quite naturally, in the relation of dramatic actions performed by individuals to the assembled observers – in this case, the Athenian citizenry or body politic.[7] Just as the purview of Greek tragedy included political as well as historical, mythic, and religious discourses, the counterpoise of character and chorus made for dramatic situations in which the Athenian spectators participated, as if analogously,

as members of a civic forum as well as witnesses to a religious spectacle and theatrical entertainment.

A stage figure such as the Antigone of Sophocles would, in this view, be simultaneously a young woman who appears centrally in several dramas and also as one who stands before a public tribunal within the varying circumstances of her story. The Greek audience, knowledgeable in the myths and histories upon which the plays of Sophocles or Aeschylus (for example) were based, was well-acquainted with the stories that were turned into theatre at the City Dionysia – but they would not know how Euripides, say, or another dramatist, might choose to depict Electra, Phaedra, Medea, or even Dionysus by comparison with the same figure as imagined by another writer. In so richly generative a setting, the versatility of theatrical characterization – or, let us say, the mutability of the Dionysian mask, including as it does a mirror of the god's contradictory nature as an ingredient of conflict in drama – made way in the ancient Greek world for a burgeoning of theatre that was swift and vastly inclusive, a drama that could encompass the cosmic as well as localized and personal arenas.

In spite of these seminal, even definitive, aspects of ancient drama, Greek tragedy or comedy is, of course, only one (albeit astonishing) instance in which a fashioning of dramatic character is wedded directly and necessarily to formal aspects of dramaturgy and, in particular, to dramatic structure. My investigation of the ratio between characterization and dramatic form is advanced in Chapter 2, "Character, Form, and Genre," wherein this interrelation is examined from historic as well as aesthetic standpoints, with Shakespeare's Hamlet serving as prototype. Is Hamlet aware that he is a dramatic character? In one sense, of course, certainly not. He is a fiction, the invention of a dramatist, and his business is to ponder mortality, not the existential or ontological (or Pirandellian) implications of being a functional component in someone's play. And yet, at the same time – yes, absolutely. Hamlet is exquisitely self-conscious; he is consistently aware that he is a pawn – or player – in a larger and enigmatic game, and that some cosmic or malign duress has both fingered him and prompted him to performance along with actions taken or delayed. Hamlet is demonstrative and theatrical, an actor and enthusiast of acting, both. Indeed, Hamlet's self-consciousness as a performer – or, again, as "player" – makes him an exemplar of meta-characterization. He is also, to be sure, a figure of tragedy, as were so many of his Greek forbears. By Shakespeare's day, of course, the dramaturgy as well as the language of dramatic characterization and of tragic drama had shifted markedly from

the ancient patterns. Even so, new and evolving theatrical forms could be rigidly deterministic with regard to character types, motives, and behaviors, in both the Elizabethan and Jacobean settings.

Given the potential rigors of a dramatic form, but in consideration also of Hamlet's versatility as well as intellect, can such a figure have autonomy? Does a character in drama have any quotient of freedom at all? Here again, one might respond quite reasonably with a "no" or a "yes." No, in that characters in plays are written; they are defined utterly, like Pirandello's rueful and introspective Father, by the contours of their respective dramas. And yet, at the same time, yes, because the resourceful actions and deliberations of characters, even as they arise from the imagination and inventiveness of the playwright, are what seem to engender such stories and structures in the first place. Here again, the theatrical illusion is such that a stage figure who appears to be like us, with our own ostensible freedoms regarding volition, will quite likely be perceived as having choice. That character's fate may be written, but choice in itself is dramatic and life-like and is provocative of suspense and engagement with a play's progression of events.

The issue here could scarcely be more crucial in its relation of structural considerations – elements of plot and the orchestration of scenes, chiefly – to characterization. Indeed, this relationship has, since Aristotle, provided for a sophisticated set of philosophic interrogations as well as aesthetic balances. The action of tragic dramas, for example, typically contains an intrinsic aspect that is directional, a fatality or destiny to which a character is bound, no matter any exertions to the contrary. From this standpoint, Hamlet can no more avoid a calamitous demise than Oedipus can foil the prophecies of gods. Comedy, on the other hand, often partakes of and thrives on the chaotic, with characters surviving through wit, guile, or plain dumb luck under apparently uncontrolled and at times perilously farcical circumstances. In either instance, however, there is the aspect of genre, form, or artistic philosophy that signals a corresponding dramaturgical tactic and an appropriate conception of character. Even as stage characters may be dependent fundamentally upon a practical assignation of traits, as Aristotle would advise, such qualities must be fitting and truthful not only to the particular individual and story but also to a play's formal and stylistic identity.[8]

Is it most pleasing or socially advantageous when the behaviors of a dramatic character provide the audience with an admirable, or at least useful, example – and if so, should such a model for characterization be a requisite for the creation of theatre? In Chapter 3, "Character by the

Rules: Neoclassicism and Beyond," a French Neoclassical ideal is consulted on this question, one that has implications well beyond the time of Molière, Corneille, or Racine. Within the stringent admonitions of French Neoclassicism as applied to theatrical art, guidelines of duration, location, action, genre, the depiction of violence or the supernatural, and the portrayal of individuals, including their deeds and outcomes, was followed exactingly. The unities should be obeyed; a play is either a tragedy or a comedy, with no cross-pollination; scenes of violence and horror must be reported and described verbally rather than shown onstage; characters who behave respectably should merit reward while those who are excessive or otherwise debauched must suffer – and often horribly, as in the case of Racine's Phaedra and Hippolytus. From the Neoclassical standpoint in general, the "character" qualities of a dramatic character are very much at issue, the simple reason being that the behaviors of fictional personas – and perhaps especially those who are visibly embodied upon the stage – can be so persuasive and influential upon the observer. And yet, by no means does this important concern belong solely to the Neoclassicists or to any one period in history. In fact, the conception of dramatic character as role model, or as object of potential imitation for an audience, endures and remains contentious to this day.

Even as controversy may center now on other dramatic media – the potential influences of filmed or televised violence, drug use, or sexuality, say – it was the theatre, and stage characters, where this attention was focused first, and with lasting and far-reaching effects. Moreover, the reference to stage characters as exemplars of behavior has contributed over time and on several occasions to instances of antitheatrical prejudice, whereby fictional personages are taken to task by critics of the theatre such as, famously, Jeremy Collier or Jean-Jacques Rousseau.[9] Significantly, a hallmark of dramatic writing in seventeenth-century Europe is a marked emphasis upon enlightened reason by comparison with the passions, with admonitory cautions regarding the latter. Given the centrality of this dialectic of rationality and high feeling, I pursue the question in Chapter 3 of how complete or fully rounded a character in drama can be if the emotions are stunted or if they are represented as dangerous or in need of modulation.

A quality of life-likeness, touched upon earlier in comparison with that of completeness, is of vital significance with respect to characters seen on stage, and a play need not be strictly realistic for this to be the case. In fact, the degree to which a dramatic character approximates a "real" person, and can be believable as such, is in many ways the primary basis for

an audience's reception of such a figure and the success of the theatrical representation or illusion overall. In Chapter 4, "Scientific Character: The How and Why of Naturalism – and After," there is a shift in focus from the importance of behavioral standards or practical traits to the criterion of truthfulness in the depiction of persons on stage. Here, my initial point of reference is the naturalism associated with Émile Zola – and, in a closely related instance, August Strindberg – and the extent to which reasons that may underlie or account for a character's nature, behaviors, or motives are viewed as paramount in the story telling. Is environment the key, as Zola would propose? What importance is given to factors of economic status, heredity and parentage, psychology or physical health as formative and as basis for accuracy in depiction?

My intention in this chapter is to examine the avowedly scientific impulse that was characteristic of both Zola and Strindberg along with others in the late nineteenth century and afterward. Elaborating on that motive and extending its purview, the chapter inquires also into the manner in which the sciences and scientific discoveries have continued to shape not only the understandings of the human self but also the ways in which personhood can be represented in art in accord with what is known, say, of biology, physics, or neuroscience at a particular point in history. The recent popularity of the "science play" is referenced in this regard, as are differences between narrative fiction and drama with respect to a "real person" dilemma that arises in any art form as a ratio of representation to what is represented, but is particularly acute in the case of dramatic character.

A different intricacy results when factors of consciousness and cognition are introduced in ways that relate specifically to the depiction of a character's thought processes. In Chapter 5, "How Characters Think," the inquiry turns again to interiority and how it is revealed on stage, including a comparison to the representation of thought in fictional narrative, with Henry James's character of Isabel Archer serving as a ready example. In this instance, too, there is an innate relation of dramatic character to dramaturgy, due largely to the question of what is required for a portrayal of thought and how that is accomplished on stage as opposed to in narrative writing. A character's manner of thinking becomes, along these lines, a dramaturgical consideration along with matters of genre, scenic structure and focus, thematic considerations, or artistic philosophy per se. However, and while there are plays in which access to the mind of a character is germane and necessary, there are many others where it is of lesser importance in the storytelling. Indeed,

there are innumerable situations in which a character in drama requires little interiority or presentation of thought whatsoever, not because the character's thinking is irrelevant to the action but because the playwright's emphasis is elsewhere – on events of plot, most likely, or performative or exteriorized behaviors, as in Restoration comedy. Do we need to venture inside the mind or emotional temper of Mr. Horner in Wycherley's *The Country Wife*, or are his intentions plain enough? There are occasions, too, where the portrayal of a mental state is enhanced by a corresponding style – as, for instance, in expressionist drama when a character's inner life and point of view are accentuated by theatrically stylized means, such as in Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal* or Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*.

Interiority provides one perspective on thought, most typically of the reflective or introspective variety, while ratiocination, inference, intuition, attention, or observation offer other means of access to a character's way of thinking. The strategy of Chapter 5, therefore, is to analyze the mentalities, thought processes, and states of consciousness of representative characters in different periods, and to assess these comparatively, with reference to one another and also to narrative fiction. In this regard, the complexity of mind associated with Hamlet, for instance, or with Halvard Solness in Ibsen's *The Master Builder*, stands for one sort of theatrically represented interiority or self-consciousness, while a figure such as Arthur Miller's Quentin, in *After the Fall*, has not only a different mode of thought from either – one that foregrounds memory – but also a way of thinking that calls for a unique dramatic structure in which recollection itself prompts the order of events. In each case, though, the particular historical and geographical milieu in which a play is situated, with corresponding linguistic, scientific, and cultural understandings, is pertinent. One might wonder, in fact, if in consideration of such differences among sensibilities it is possible at all to draw meaningful comparisons, or if stage figures from contrasting eras might be too disparate for such analysis. For purposes here, again, the effort is to be inclusive, and to assess phenomena that have been most pertinent to the fashioning of dramatic characters over time – including their thought processes.

Psychoanalytic perspectives, as they apply to past or more recent times, are considered here also in relation to particular prototypes as well as more generally. In this regard, prominent archetypes of character (as, for example, in familial interrelations) are examined in conjunction with Freudian and Lacanian theory among other contextual frameworks. My primary aim, though, is to examine how consciousness is depicted in drama and

literature in relation to theories of mind and cognition, and in philosophic as well as neuroscientific or psychological terms. Consciousness is investigated from both a standpoint of familiarity – as a phenomenon that is universal among human beings – and as mysterious in the sense of scientifically unexplained. Also problematic in this regard is the concept of "self," which has a natural, not to say innate, linkage to character as well as consciousness.

With respect to either dramatic or narrative character, what is to be understood by terms such as identity, personality, or selfhood? To what extent are these interchangeable, and in what cases not?[10] In this instance, too, the pertinence of such phenomena is wedded necessarily to historical situations and contexts – and, in particular, to levels of understanding of cognition and its processes and implications at given times, scientifically and in common parlance. Characters that are conceived for the stage or for the novel, while possibly sharing a similar object of imitation – the human mind, with all of its intricacies and vulnerabilities – can be strikingly different in the context of how thinking and state of consciousness are represented to a theatre audience as opposed to a reader. There are, in short, very different means of showing and of describing per se – a key factor in dramaturgy as well as theatre aesthetics. The significance and centrality, not to mention complexity, of this distinction is such that comparisons are necessary not only among plays but also with novels or short stories that feature a portrayal of thought. To that end, I refer comparatively in Chapter 5 not only to Edgar Allan Poe and Henry James but to more recent fictional narratives that share an emphasis on thought process and neuroscience.

Over the past hundred years especially, the fashioning of characters has at times included a reflection of the self and personality in disjuncture, as illogical, unreliable, or lacking a cohesive basis or definition. Naturalistic and other methods of unified or integrated depiction have in this context been countered or discounted in numerous ways, sometimes in response to a worldview that is similarly fragmented, disjointed, nonsensical, or absurd in the sense of inchoate or meaningless. The concept of a cohesive, unique, and definitive self has been queried repeatedly, not to say disproven, from more than a few psychological or philosophic standpoints. Just as a dramatic structure, when standing for a fragmented condition or situation, may need to violate the terms of a more balanced, synchronous, or unitary means of showing, so too a dramatic character may be fashioned to embody disassociation or a lack of empirical sense or meaning. Dramatic character and dramaturgy can, in this sense also, be