

Characters in Mind: How Readers Recognize Literary Persons across Narratives

written by Jan Rügemeier | 1. January 2023



Image 1: Shrek “The Whole Story” (Cover)

Binge-watching became a habit for my kids and me long before the Covid pandemic. It has already been a few years since the four of us devoured all Shrek movies together in a single weekend, but I remember being amazed that our children, without giving it much thought, recognized among the cast Cinderella, Rapunzel, Rumpelstiltskin, and a bunch of other characters they knew from our bedtime readings. What really got me thinking, though, was that my kids recognized Pinocchio, a character they had only ‘met’ during our then recent summer vacation in Italy. Obviously, they still had the little wooden boy in their minds after seeing him several times in souvenir stores.

Fortunately, such heavy media consumption had a stimulating effect on my academic work. It has piqued my interest in the question of how viewers or readers remember and recognize characters. Delving into literary discourse, I

learned that our Shrek family experience is far from unknown: Some twenty years ago, Umberto Eco already noted that “characters migrate” (Eco 2005: 8; Ital. 2002) that is to say, some characters leave the original text in which they were ‘born’ also to become inhabitants of later stories, theatre plays, operas or movies. Other literary critics have likewise referred to this phenomenon, albeit using quite different terms. For example, Thomas G. Pavel (Pavel 1986) and Lubomír Doležal (Doležal 1998a) popularized the term *transworld identity*, while Gérard Genette uses the term *sequels* (Genette 1997) and Uri Margolin either speaks of *itinerant individuals* (Margolin 1990) or simply *versions* (Margolin 1996). In today’s media studies the terms *transmedial character* (Richardson 2010; Wunderlich 2010) and *transworld character* (Lăcan 2019; Reicher 2010) have gained currency, placing more emphasis on the aspect of media transitions.

None of these works, however, offered a satisfying answer to my initial question about how readers and viewers recognize characters across different narratives and media. Influenced by the modal logic of their time, most of the above studies rather tend to ask about the ontological status of transworld identities. Others are concerned only with exemplary case studies and show little to no interest in systematization or historical comparison. Strikingly, all of the studies mentioned above focus exclusively on modern narratives, with some even claiming that the entire phenomenon of character migration only came into vogue with the advent of a commercial book market.



Image 2: Healing of the hemorrhaging woman Marcellinus Peter Catacomb

For someone like me, who has a penchant for ancient literature, this seems a daring thesis. Characters such as Medea, Antigone, Orpheus, Remus and Romulus, Adam and Eve, Solomon, Elijah, and Moses quickly come to mind because they reappear in countless texts after their debut. Furthermore, characters from the New Testament and early Christian literature, such as the woman who anoints Jesus, the son of the royal official, Mary Magdalene, the paralytic, Joseph of Arimathea, Peter and other apostles—all of whom can be perceived as migration characters, as they reappear in different gospel texts. The number of migration characters increases significantly when we include the noncanonical gospels, the apocryphal Acts, other early Christian writings, and ancient Christian art. To give but one example, the hemorrhaging woman is repeatedly portrayed in catacomb paintings, sometimes receiving individualized facial features of the deceased (see [image 2](#)). And Eusebius even stated that there was a statue of a man and a kneeling woman in Caesarea Philippi, which he identified as Jesus and the hemorrhagic woman ([Eusebius, Hist. eccl. 7.18](#)). While this assertion will hardly be historically accurate, it reveals that Eusebius and his readers expected and recognized such representations of New Testament characters.

After my not entirely satisfying reading of literary studies, it was only in cognitive science that I found an answer to my original question about the underlying principles of character migration. In his book [The Literary Mind](#), Mark Turner touches on the example of Sherlock Holmes, who—with more than two thousand adaptations—can fairly be considered the prime example of a migration character. Although he does not directly reference the above mentioned literary critics, Mark sparked my interest by pointing to the reader's ability to recognize characters and anticipate their behavior based on a rather abstract notion of their personality. Thus, he states that

“our sense of someone's general character guides our expectations of which roles he will play in which stories. For example, we know what Sherlock Holmes is likely to do in any story in which he exists” (Turner 1996: 133; my emphasis).



Image 3: The Strand
(1891): illustration by
Sidney Paget

This statement can be related to the more general cognitive science insight that our brain usually does not get distracted by the myriad features of a person or character, but inevitably abstracts a first encounter to build a simplified mental model of that very entity. Accordingly, we reduce a person or literary character to his or her general character traits. The main function of a mental model or schema is to simplify reality and to provide a skeletal conception that helps us to remember and rapidly process information. A mental model helps us recognize Sherlock only by the mention of a “genius detective”, by his companion “Dr. Watson”, and say, a “deerstalker”—though the latter is never mentioned in the printed Sherlock novels, but was only introduced in illustrations in “The Strand” in 1891 (see [image 3](#)).

Perceiving characters not as mere textual phenomena but also as mental models is helpful in another regard: It explains why characters can be innovatively developed and readily adapted by later authors. According to a well-known statement by Marvin Minsky, a mental model or frame is best described as “a sort of skeleton, somewhat like an application form with many blanks or slots to be filled” (Minsky 1988: 245). Due to this slot-filler structure the idea of a person does not have to be confirmed in all parts by the incoming data of a text or movie, but can easily be challenged, refreshed, changed or even combined with new attributes and ideas (of which the above mentioned incorporation of the deerstalker would be exemplary). Watching “Shrek 1” we do not get confused by the fact that, in contrast to Carlo Collodi’s original

novel, Pinocchio suddenly speaks English (rather than Italian), lives in a very different story world (with only two rivers, one of which is called Pinocchio river), and is a friend of Shrek. We even cope with the fact that the loving relationship between Pinocchio and his father has turned into the opposite: in *Shrek 1*, Geppetto is no longer the self-sacrificing father because he sells the chatty puppet for the ridiculous amount of five shillings, simply to get rid of it. As long as we recognize Pinocchio by a few essential features, such as his outer appearance (wooden puppet), behavior (he lies), or desire (to become a real boy) we have no difficulty accepting a whole variety of changes. In fact, readers usually pay even more attention to those features that invert our previous expectations and seem innovative ([Eder 2008](#): 210-211).

Still, “the tricky question is, of course,” as Maria Reicher in a more recent article states, “which of a character’s internal properties are supposed to be ‘essential’ and which are not” (Reicher 2010: 127). This question arises all the more when we turn to ancient narratives. While characters like Sherlock or Pinocchio are deeply anchored in our own cultural memory and we therefore recognize them intuitively, this obviously does not apply in the same way to our perception of ancient characters. Cognitive models remain historically and culturally constrained, which is why the idea or image of a literary person is not directly accessible to us, but has to be traced and derived from (often fragmentary) source material. Still, cognitive science helps us with this very task as the underlying mechanisms that allow us to identify characters have most likely remained the same over the last three thousand years. At least, it is a fairly safe guess that ancient readers could also recognize a literary character by its prominent traits and its relation to other protagonists or narrative settings. Although we will never be able to extract the mental models of an ancient character from the memory of ancient people, a cognitive science perspective helps us to identify existing transtextual, transmedial, and transcultural interdependencies beyond previous textual approaches.

Let me illustrate this—in broad strokes—with an example from the New Testament (for an application to Isaiah’s Servant see Rügemeier 2021). The woman who anoints Jesus is one of those characters occurring in all four canonical Gospels ([Mark 14:3-9](#); [Matt 26:6-13](#); [Luke 7:36-50](#); [John 11:2 and 12:1-8](#)). Still, the respective characterizations are distinguished by an astonishing variability. In Mark, Matthew, and Luke the woman remains

anonymous, while in John she is identified as Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. Luke has her appear in the garb of a sinner, while in Mark she appears as a prophetess who knows about Jesus' imminent death. While in Mark and Matthew she pours oil over Jesus' head, evoking the association of a royal anointing, in Luke and John's account she anoints Jesus' feet. The differences among the four narratives also include the time and setting. Thus, the scene between Jesus and the woman can take place in the house of Simon the leper in Bethany (Mark 14:3; Matt 26:6), preceding Jesus' passion. John, on the other hand, locates the event in the home of the three siblings Mary, Martha, and Lazarus (John 12:1-3) just before Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Luke, finally, places the episode in the house of Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:36, 40) and in the context of Jesus' ministry in Galilee.

The obvious divergences have already made the church fathers wonder whether the narratives refer to one and the same woman. While Origen deny that they do, Augustine and others have tried to explain the variations by different occasions in the life of Mary ([Augustine, Cons. 2.79.154](#)):

Sed eandem Mariam bis hoc fecisse, semel scilicet, quod Lucas narravit, cum primo accedens cum illa humilitate et lacrimis meruit peccatorum remissionem. [...] Quod autem in Bethania rursus fecit, aliud est, quod ad Lucae narrationem non pertinet, sed pariter narratur a tribus, Joanne scilicet, Matthaeo et Marco.

But the same Mary did this twice: The one [occasion] being that which Luke narrated, when she first approached him with that humility and tears and earned the forgiveness of sins. [...] However, what he [Jesus] did again in Bethany is something else, and this does not belong to Luke's narrative, but is narrated by three [other authors], this is: John, Matthew and Mark.

What becomes evident by this attempt at harmonization is that readers of all times are challenged by inconsistencies in a character model and try to establish a constancy between different accounts through (a range of) individual framings.

Modern exegesis has tried in its own way to deal with the obvious contradictions, with two approaches in particular gaining acceptance (in the past): One group of scholars attempts to explain the woman's reoccurrence

diachronically, by tracing the history and literary development of the account. Exemplary of this approach is Michael Theobald's commentary on the Gospel of John ([Theobald 2009](#)), in which he reckons with a pre-Lukan tradition and an older Bethany account that was then gradually reshaped to the episodes we know from John and Mark. However, this approach has been challenged since the early 1990s by another group of scholars who explain the similarities between the different gospel accounts as deliberate intertextuality. Representatives of this intertextual reading appear in the works of Hartwig Thyen and Maurits Sabbe. Thus, Sabbe reckons with "a kind of elliptic rendering of the Lukan text" (Sabbe 1992: 2072) in John, while Thyen postulates an *ideal reader*, who is familiar with all three synoptic accounts (Thyen 1992: 97).

Now it is easy to see that the postulation of such an ideal reader raises questions from a historical point of view. Given the high illiteracy rate in ancient societies and the fact that few people could afford their own books for private and repeated readings, it can be assumed that the actual readers of John's Gospel had exceedingly rudimentary knowledge of any other Gospel text, if any. The postulate of a seamless genealogy, on the other hand, excludes from the outset the creative appropriation of narratives by later authors and the ability of readers to cope with deviations. From a cognitive science point of view, there is actually no need to explain all textual differences by further pretexts, since corresponding innovations can be explained much more easily as modifications of a more abstract character model.

As for the woman anointing Jesus, there is certainly circumstantial evidence that she was anchored in an early Christian memory, that is, beyond the four textual versions we know today. In Mark 14:9, Jesus explicitly says that "when the gospel is proclaimed (*kērychthē*) in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be spoken of (*lalēthēsetai*)—in memory of her (*eis mnēmósynon autēs*)." What is striking here is that the two verbs *kēryssein* and *lalein* both refer to an oral context, that is, to the pre-Markan proclamation of the Gospel. This should by no means be hastily dismissed as a purely fictional statement. Rather, one must be aware that the prediction of the woman's worldwide fame in Mark's literary context carries with it the potential danger of making Jesus look like a liar—and that is when the woman remains *de facto* unknown to the actual readers of Mark. If, on the other hand, the woman had been known at

the time of the writing of Mark's Gospel, Jesus' prediction would simply confirm his reliability. A corresponding narrative strategy that emphasizes Jesus' trustworthiness can be traced throughout Mark's entire gospel (cf. [Rüggemeier](#) 2017: 344-54). Although the existence of such character model, predating Mark's gospel, cannot be proven in a strict sense, its assumption fits well to Mark's narrative strategy.

The readers' familiarity with the anointing woman seems also presupposed in John's gospel. In John 11:2 the gospel readers are informed by a narrative aside that Mary, the sister of Lazarus, who was just introduced to them, is the very same woman "who anointed the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair." While the primary function of this *parenthesis* is to alert the reader to the later reported anointing of Jesus (John 12:1-8), it simultaneously presupposes the readers' familiarity with the woman. In particular, John's use of an affirmative aorist (*aleípsasa*) in this context shows that the anointing is already in the past from the readers' perspective. However, John's readers need not have acquired this knowledge by reading other gospel texts. John, at least, makes no effort to refer to any particular gospel version. His statement that the woman "anointed the Kyrios with ointment" (*aleípsasa tòn kýrion myró*) remains rather general and is consistent with both Mark's and Luke's depiction.

The second piece of information, that the woman wiped Jesus' feet with her hair, does not change this. Even to those readers familiar with Luke's account, this statement remains surprising, as John obviously thinks of a wiping of the ointment. By contrast, in John we do not learn with a single syllable that the woman wetted Jesus' feet with her tears. The function of the second clause is thus less to establish a textual reference than to prepare John's own theological point: Thus, in John 12 emphasis is put on the narrative detail that Mary absorbs the ointment with her hair and fills the whole house with the perfume's fragrance. For John, the pleasant smell of the perfume contrasts with the aforementioned stench of decay and illustrates Mary's joy in life and gratitude for her brother's resurrection. Again, it cannot be proven how John's readers knew about the anointing woman, but an abstract idea of her would have been sufficient to understand the narrative and even to grasp the theological point of the fourth gospel. Constitutive of a corresponding character model would have been only the (provocative) act of anointing, the relationship between the woman and Jesus, and the presence of male

antagonists. The high value of the ointment, the setting (house), or the woman's motivation, on the other hand, would have been merely secondary features of the narrative.

In my view, the example of the anointing woman illustrates not only the possibilities but also the limitations of a cognitive-scientific approach to the phenomenon of migration characters. Although four canonical variants are available to us, access to the underlying mental model necessarily remains hidden precisely because it is a cognitive entity.

Only through further detailed investigations and a transdisciplinary exchange among scholars of ancient studies will the potentials be weighed more precisely. One opportunity for this ongoing dialogue will be the Bonn conference "[Characters in Mind](#)" (Feb 8-10, 2023).

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