The Applications and Limitations of Narrative Theory to the Study of Homeric Characters

This paper proposes the character of Andromache in the *Iliad* as a case study for the applications and limitations of Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan’s narratological analysis of direct definition in the study of Homeric character. Although narratology remains a popular heuristic tool in analyzing the Homeric narrator and narrative, it has been underutilized as a means of analyzing Homeric character. In her *Narratological Commentary on the Odyssey* (2004), Irene de Jong proposes a system which categorizes character traits as explicitly or implicitly stated, and which defines content as narratorial or actorial. De Jong’s system does not look beyond the mechanics of characterization, and the scope of her commentary prevents her from providing a close analysis of any one character. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan also outlines a narratological system of analysis based on explicit and implicit expression of traits. In her work *Narrative Fiction* (1983), Rimmon-Kenan outlines a system similarly based on the dual character markers of direct definition (explicit naming of traits) and indirect presentation (inference of traits based on the observation and report of a character’s words, thoughts, and behavior). Rimmon-Kenan takes her analysis farther than de Jong, however, by using the expressed and inferred traits to classify characters with respect to three criteria. Characters are described as possessing degrees of complexity, development, and access to consciousness, which avoids the necessity of narrowly defining characters as “round” or “flat.”

Rimmon-Kenan’s system is particularly well-suited to the systematic study of Homeric character because direct definition can easily exploit the so-called “economy of epithets” (Parry 1971). The number, variety, and repetition of traits assigned to a character are important facets in determining character type, character complexity and development, and the representation of an inner consciousness. In Homeric epic, direct definition for each character is highlighted within the text by his or her epithets, and the epithets may be easily collated and categorized under a variety of headings addressing familial connections, social status, physical qualities, and mental capability, among others. Despite Parry’s insistence that generic epithets carry no semantic weight (Parry, 1971), the subsequent scholarly discussion has shown that such epithets *do* act as significant character markers when the context of application is taken into consideration (Lowenstam, 1993; Vivante, 1982, Whallon, 1969). The wide application of a trait in the form of a generic epithet creates a pool of subjects which helps to define the trait within the ethos of the narrative, and a pool which in turn offers models to better understand the trait in the studied character. This is particularly helpful for analyzing the significance of minor characters whose limited role in the narrative does not provide a vast number or variety of descriptors.

This paper shows how certain noun/name + epithet formulae connect Andromache to a larger intra- and intertextual pool of Homeric women who share familial roles (such as ἄλοχος φίλος, *Il*. 6.366), physical characteristics (such as λευκώλενος, Il. 6.371) or some other qualitative descriptor (such as ἀμύμων, *Il*. 6.374). Because she shares these qualities with other women, Andromache’s character participates in the defining and refining of those Homeric values the epithet denotes. Yet no one woman shares all descriptors with Andromache, and this variety among similar characters opens a broader context of interpretation through contrast. The interpretation of Andromache’s epithets ἀμύμων (*Il*. 6.374) and πολύδωρος (*Il*. 6.394, 22.88), which are historically difficult to interpret (Amory Parry, 1973; Vivante, 1982; Perysinakis, 1991; Lowenstam, 1993), benefit from this comparative approach. Yet taken on its own, this method has limited use. No epithets describing mental facilities are ascribed to Andromache, and there are few qualitative descriptors ascribed to her. A character can be fully understood only when both character markers (direct definition and indirect presentation) are analyzed in conjunction. Nevertheless, direct definition offers an intriguing starting point which takes advantage of the unique stylistic elements of Homeric poetry.

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