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Something Borrowed: Interfigural Characterisation in Anglo-American Fantasy Comics

Essi Varis

Abstract

It is no secret that comics' formal structure resembles a pastiche: images, words and gaps of different styles and abstraction levels mix to tell a story that is more than their sum. Is it any wonder, then, that modern, myth-driven graphic novels tend to borrow their content elements – such as characters – from several heterogeneous sources as well? Wolfgang G. Müller's little-known but widely applicable theory of interfigurality (1991) shows how literary characters gain depth and resonance by sharing elements with characters in other works. The chapter revises his theory and shows how it could also be used in the analysis of comic book characters.

Fantasy comics from Vertigo series like *Fables* and *The Sandman* to works like *Hellboy* or *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* draw their readerly and scholarly appeal from their eclectic, literary character galleries. Especially Mike Carey and Peter Gross' *The Unwritten* (2009–) realises every type of interfigurality Müller has identified in experimental literature, and even adds alternatives of its own. Close reading of this ongoing series underlines that interfigurality is a flexible, transmedial phenomenon: characters of words and images can parallel and reuse elements from purely textual characters in imaginative ways. This flexibility, however, renders Müller's name-bound character concept insufficient. Since comparing characters to one another – especially intermedially – would not be possible without complex cognitive processes, Müller's structuralistic view implies and should be supplemented with a cognitive basis.

Thus, combined with the cognitive character theories developed by Baruch Hochman (1985) and Aleid Fokkema (1991), Müller's notion of interfigurality becomes a viable analysing tool for narratives of all kinds. Since comics is a medium of gaps, fragments and “the invisible,” its heroes often read like puzzles, and some crucial pieces can occasionally be found through interfigural speculations.

Key Words: Interfigurality, intertextuality, transmediality, comic book character, character theory, cognitive theory, Vertigo comics.

1. Intertextuality of the Graphic Novel

In the past few decades, comic books, especially Western graphic novels have become bustling meeting places for creatures that originate in all kinds of stories, realities and media. This intertextual movement seems to have started and found its

culmination with DC Comics' Vertigo imprint, which was formed soon after the unexpected, unprecedented popularity of Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman* (1989–1996). Just like Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1991) has inspired the still trending wave of graphically inventive, confessional autobiographical comics, so has *The Sandman*, often dubbed “a story about stories,” seemingly launched a procession of fantasy works with highly intertextual, eclectic character galleries.

Ever since *The Sandman* sowed the seed of borrowing characters from far and wide, Vertigo writers and artists have continued to build new comic book mythologies out of the old literal ones with such series as *The Books of Magic* (1990–), *Fables* (2002–) and – most recently – *The Unwritten* (2009–). However, this surge in intertextual and literal comics can hardly be considered a private agenda of a single publisher, since many of Vertigo's titles are artist-owned and recycled heroes have starred in other publishers' popular titles as well. Mike Mignola's *Hellboy* (Dark Horse, 1994–) and Alan Moore's *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (WildStorm, 1999–) would be the obvious examples. Since the genre has gained such vast popularity so quickly, one has to wonder: can its sudden emergence be explained by Vertigo's example alone, or is there something about comics as a medium that makes them especially fertile for such intertextual gatherings?

While, according to the Kristevan tradition, all texts could be claimed to be sewn up of several little loans and re-usages, the formal construction of a comic book is especially inviting to all kinds of styles and elements. This is because comics are essentially pastiche-like combinations of very diverse fragments. Since everything is divided into separate issues, panels and text boxes or bubbles, nothing really compels each element to be entirely uniform. In addition, every one of these fragments is often hand-made from scratch, typically by several different artists and writers; in which case keeping every element uniform actually becomes quite impossible. What results are extremely polyphonic jig-saw puzzles like *The Sandman*, where one wobbly speech bubble delivers the incoherent thoughts of a drunkard while another contains the formal utterances of a dream god; where one page brings to mind a sophisticated fairytale illustration while another resembles a painting by Piet Mondrian.

In these discontinuous, collaborative and eclectic spaces for storytelling, it seems perfectly natural that even such large and complex story elements as characters are more often than not recycled from other narratives. Further, the multimodality of comics allows recreating characters from any other medium. Because most fictional characters, regardless of their exact medial origins, have more or less unique names and prominent traits, they are often easy to recognise regardless of the exact medial renditions. On the other hand, when a book or a film character enters into a comic book, they also gain new dimensions. Literary characters are given perceptible physical forms, whereas character-focalised visual

perspectives and text snippets can open new, revealing windows into the heads of cinematic – or even historical – figures.

Another equally plausible factor propelling these intertextual phenomena could be the long-standing tradition of comic book universes. The centralised copyrights of large comic book companies have for long allowed the interaction of characters that were originally created by different artists for different titles. Marvel and DC universes encourage, even oblige the characters and artists they involve to transtextual collaboration. Even if crossover titles like *The Avengers* (1963–) or *The Justice League of America* (1960–) were originally created for and because of commercial reasons, the phenomenon has definitely impacted comics as a medium by demanding more flexibility and a very unique brand of continuity from its storyworlds and characters. On the other hand, these projects have proved that comic book characters are capable of such a high level of transtextuality they can bounce from a title, storyline, artist or version to another almost boundlessly.¹ At the same time, this means that comic book readers, at least those faithful to superhero comics, have been habituated into following their favourite characters through very complex and fragmentary narrative constructions – a skill that has no doubt proved useful as Hollywood’s newly found interest in superheroes and the fan cultures thriving in the internet have complicated the characters’ existence even further.

It is only logical, then, that graphic novels, keen on luring mature readers and gaining recognition as “proper” art, would rather share their universe with canonised literature. By applying the transtextual workings typical of comic books to the storyworlds of Victorian literature or fairytales, Vertigo comics have built new universes where new comic book creations and old characters from esteemed literary works co-exist. Since figures from Grimm’s fairytales and the Bible or characters like Frankenstein’s monster are so protean and widely recognised as to be considered cultural symbols, their very presence might grant their host-comics deeper resonance. At the same time, these archetypal characters are (once again) recreated and sustained through incorporating new, perhaps more contemporary meanings and visual features. Of course, such crossbreeding of round, “high art” characters and “low” comic book narratives also amplifies the pastiche-like quality discussed above.

2. Intertextuality of the Character

The hypothesis that intertextual characterisation is especially typical of comics is supported by the fact that the phenomenon has barely been noticed in literary research. On the other hand, character research has been so astonishingly scarce even in literary studies it is no wonder that some of its subfields are still under-theorised. Any peculiarities of characters are usually treated as parts or instances of larger themes or structures, and this seems to be the case with intertextuality as well: although there is little mention of intertextuality in literary character theories,

terms like intertextual characterisation or transtextual characters are readily recognised as derivatives of intertextual theory.

German literary scholar W.G. Müller has, nevertheless, coined a more specific term, which has, regrettably, not become a widespread part of the research vocabulary: *interfigurality* refers to the intertextual particles of characters or, reversely, to all manners of intertextual links manifesting through characters. The coinage seems a beneficial tool due to its transparency – its meaning is easy to decipher – and due to its flexible, hypernymic semantics. That is, it includes both the problematic ideas of intertextual characterisation and transtextual characters. The problem with the latter term is that it implies complete sameness and continuity, which has been declared impossible by several scholars, including Müller.² The former, on the other hand, seems to suggest construction of an entirely new and original character through the means of allusion. Müller's theory of interfigurality circumvents both implications by attempting to identify different degrees of sameness between the (more) original and the (more) derivative characters – or in Genettian terms, between the hypo- and the hypercharacters.³

The most extreme case of interfigurality is, of course, *re-used figures*, characters that are meant to be perceived as reincarnations of specific characters in some earlier narratives. This type of interfigurality is, in fact, almost synonymous with the more widely used notion of transtextual characters. Yet, Müller names Theodore Ziolkowski's *figures on loan* his sole inspiration, adding that the rhetoric of recasting would, however, be more appropriate than the rhetoric of borrowing.⁴ After all, the characters are not temporarily transferred from a context to another only to be returned to their starting points later. More importantly, Müller, who conceptualises characters rather structuralistically, as “coherent bundle[s] of qualities” bound together by “identifying onomastic label[s]”, maintains that the “re-used figure” can never be exactly the same as the “original figure”; insofar as characters are considered organic parts of narratives, the perception of a character changes as the text matter generating it changes.⁵

This, of course, makes the exact boundaries of re-usage quite elusive. Obviously, the sameness of the author and the continuity of the “onomastic labels” are helpful signals, but unlike another theorist, Brian Richardson, Müller does not limit the area of re-used figures solely to the autographic or legally valid namesakes.⁶ Instead, he talks about absorbing “the essential character” or the “idea” of a character “into the formal and ideological structure” of a new work.⁷ Supposedly this means that there should not be major controversies between the traits of the two versions of the character, but its roles and symbolic meanings can change.

Since Müller resorts to such functional analysis, it seems reasonable to assume that when the character's meaning depends on it being recognised as something familiar and antecedent, it should be considered a re-used figure. Vertigo comics are filled with apposite examples: *Fables* would lose most of its sense, resonance

and fantastic quality were the characters not recognised as actual fairytale figures but, for example, as dream images, vehicles for political satire or mental patients pretending to be princes and princesses. In *The Unwritten*, many of the major themes hinge on the doubly made nature of Frankenstein's monster – it is thus important that Mike Carey and Peter Gross' version of the monster is not only identified as the same monster Victor Frankenstein created, but as the same character Mary Shelley wrote. Similarly, Neil Gaiman is so determined to convince the reader that Orpheus of *The Sandman* is the same unlucky bard as Orpheus of Greek mythology that he retells the entire myth in comic book form – and only makes additions that do not overtly contradict the original story (see *The Sandman's* special issue, "The Song of Orpheus", 1991).

Müller also lists three other types of interfigural phenomena that do not necessarily indicate the sameness of two characters but, rather, a link or an analogy between them: shared names, combinations and reader figures.

Since Müller bases his definition of character on the already cited "onomastic labels," it is no wonder that he puts much emphasis on character names. Whether unchanged or slightly distorted, the names provide clues for further interfigural links: they are important signposts in, for example, *Fables* or *The Sandman*, where re-used figures are many and some only appear quite briefly.⁸ *The Unwritten*, on the other hand, challenges the reader with its name transformations: Harry Potter is not recast as "Tommy Taylor" by accident but the occupational surnames are used to indicate an underlying theme of creation and being created.⁹

Character *combinations* are simply cases of interfigurality, where familiar faces (or names) from different works are brought together and made to interact.¹⁰ Clearly, series like *The Sandman*, *Fables* or *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* – and, indeed, the very concept of comic book universes – are based on such combinations and draw much of their appeal and content from the new compounds that result.

Complicating the concept of the *reading protagonist* is the main attraction of *The Unwritten*. This interfigural phenomenon is classically exemplified by Don Quixote, a character who identifies so strongly with the characters he reads about it actually changes his demeanor.¹¹ In *The Unwritten*, however, it is no longer clear who emulates whom: Tom the protagonist has to assume several interfigural roles as he navigates through his father's literary legacy – including the Harry Potter-like figure who is supposedly modelled on himself, not vice versa.

Even more interestingly, *The Unwritten* plays with and identifies its heroes through generic *character conventions* – not just specific, identifiable hypercharacters, on which Müller concentrates. For example, the vampire characters of *The Unwritten* do not seem to be based on a specific vampire mythology but borrow freely from different traditions. As one of the characters turns into a vampire, another character tests his new abilities noting: "Mostly, I just wanted to make sure you were a Wilson Taylor vampire, rather than, say, Stoker,

Matheson or King."¹² Wilson Taylor is a fictional author featured in the series, and his vampire mythology, of course, is derivative of the said real-life authors.

3. Intertextuality of the Reader

The fact that every type of interfigurality discussed by Müller can easily be exemplified by cursory references to Vertigo comics indicates two things: that interfigurality is, indeed, quite an extensive phenomenon in this genre of graphic novels, and that Müller's theory is a good, transmedially applicable starting point for the study of this phenomenon. As the same examples prove, characters are immigrating more and more often from literature to comics. Also, comics are now being adapted more and more into movies. Thus, transmediality is no trivial selling point for today's character theories.

What makes Müller's literature-based theory and, in fact, the characters themselves so flexible, however, can hardly be something as feeble as the "onomastic labels". Even though literary, comic book and film characters are all likely to have names and can, naturally, share them as well, Müller's formal conception of character is ultimately unsustainable. Two empiric instances of a same name or a same "character trait" can well exist in two different characters of two different texts but this means nothing as such. There are probably hundreds of fictional characters called Emma and even more characters that are promiscuous, but this does not mean that they all are interfigural homages to Flaubert's well-known heroine, for instance. What is more, empirically detectable, formal signs like names or visual trademarks are easily blurred by the different semiotic languages used in different media. Finally, if the detection of re-used figures really has to be based on such subjective notions as "the essence" of the characters, it should be obvious that Müller is wrongly eliminating one important factor from his theory: the reader.

Practically speaking, interfigurality means comparing different characters and different stories. Making such connections is not possible without memory, perception and other cognitive processes that can only be attributed to the reader (and the writer, who also has to read in order to build intertextual links). Thus, it has to be argued that the entire concept of interfigurality only becomes possible if it is rooted in the cognitive conception of character proposed and developed by such literary scholars as Baruch Hochman and Aleid Fokkema. According to these theories, the character is not just a "bundle of qualities" scraped together by a mere name but a malleable mental construction based not only on the semiotic data at hand but also on the reader's knowledge and beliefs about their previous experiences – including their experiences of other texts and narratives.¹³

Without acknowledging it or using the terminology, Scott McCloud's comic book theory, centred around the gaps and the "invisible" of graphic narratives, also subscribes to a similar cognitive conception. He is very clear in his view that comics are special because of the many information gaps they entail and because

those gaps can be turned into productive and unique associations in the readers' heads.¹⁴ Allusions inherent in the characters and elsewhere in the narrative are simply another kind of readerly canvas, one that McCloud fails to recognise. This might be due to the fact that interfigural elements are not gaps in the sense that they would be semiotically blank, devoid of any information and open to any interpretation. Yet, without the reader's cognitions, memories and/or active research they do lack at least a part of their meaning: the reader has to be the one to connect the dots, to respond to the interfigural cues with his or her memories. In this sense, the reader and the characters are partially "made of" the same intertexts – a relation no less intimate than the physical, psychological and social assumptions about the character that the readers base on their knowledge of real human beings, including themselves.¹⁵

It is worth noting, however, that the filling of interfigural gaps requires more culture-specific knowledge than the filling of blank gaps. Thus, it is no wonder that Western graphic novels are especially fond of recasting the kinds of figures that are most widely recognised and most steeped in symbolism in Western cultures. Shakespeare as the unhappy genius in *The Sandman*, Frankenstein's monster as the ultimate symbol of identity crisis in *The Unwritten* or Vertigo comics' different renditions of Lucifer are all great examples. In this sense, the interfigural signs could also be understood and theorized in the same way as the other culture-specific, half-opaque signs of comic vocabulary, such as emotive symbols.

All in all, it should be concluded that interfigural elements and theory can mesh quite seamlessly with comic book elements and theory. In addition, both can benefit from each other: many of today's graphic novels require understanding of intertextuality, and due to their visuality and inherent fragmentariness, comics like *The Unwritten* can, perhaps, experiment with intertextuality in ways that literature cannot. The various comic book re-usages of classic literary characters also prove that character theories can no longer dwell in literature alone but a more multi- and transmedial perspective is required. The best starting point seems to be the entity that actually collects the data across the different texts and media and stitches them together into coherent, albeit slightly Frankensteinian characters – the reader.

Notes

¹ Essi Varis, *A Frame of You: Construction of Characters in Graphic Novels* (Jyväskylä: Jyväskylän yliopisto, 2013), 43–44.

² Heinrich Plett, ed., *Intertextuality* (Berlin: Gruyter, 1991), 107.

³ Riikka Mahlamäki-Kaistinen, *Mätänevän velhon taidejulistus: Intertekstuaalisen ja -figuraalisen aineiston asema Apollinairen L'Enchanteur pourrissant teoksen tematiikassa ja symboliikassa* (Jyväskylä: Jyväskylän yliopisto, 2008), 40.

⁴ Ibid., 102. Theodore Ziolkowski, *Varieties of Literary Thematics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 123–151.

⁵ Plett, ed., *Intertextuality*, 103.

⁶ Jens Eder, Fotis Jannidis and Ralf Schneider, ed., *Revisionen: Characters in Fictional Works: Understanding Imaginary Beings in Literature, Film, and Other Media* (New York: De Gruyter, 2010), 530–539.

⁷ Plett, ed., *Intertextuality*, 107–109.

⁸ Ibid., 104–107.

⁹ Essi Varis, *A Frame of You: Construction of Characters in Graphic Novels* (Jyväskylä: Jyväskylän yliopisto, 2013), 167–168.

¹⁰ Ibid., 114–115.

¹¹ Ibid., 116–117.

¹² Mike Carey, Peter Gross, Vince Locke and Al Davidson, *The Unwritten 4: Leviathan* (New York: Vertigo, 2011), #21, [3].

¹³ Baruch Hochman, *Character in Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 31–33, 59–70. Aleid Fokkema, *Postmodern Characters: A Study of Characterization in British and American Postmodern Fiction* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1991), 181–182.

¹⁴ Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), 60–69.

¹⁵ Fokkema, *Postmodern Characters*, 74–76.

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