Make It Explicit: documenting interpretations of literary fictions with conceptual formal models (MITE)

Gaia Tomazzoli, Sapienza Università di Roma

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Defining fictional characters

- There is no clear-cut and shared definition of literary characters, but we all intuitively know what a character is, and are familiar with them since we start to read
- Features of literary characters: name, life story, relationships, personality and emotions that drive their actions (identity, function within the text and for the message)
- Interpretation of a text implies the interpretation of what its characters are and do, based on what the text explicitly says and on assumptions

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Fictional characters: theories and critical practices

- Readers respond to characters: emotions, identification, judgement
- Like reader's response, interpretation in critical practice is not neutral: our knowledge and expectations about the text (genre, author, composition) influence our interpretation of its characters, and vice versa
- Several approaches to the interpretation of fictional characters: structuralism, narratology, semiotics, marxist literary criticism, psychological analysis, cognitive approaches, relationships between ethics and literature, philology and intertextuality, gender studies…

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Some question on fictional characters

- Are characters people (more or less) like us, or do they only exist as semiotic products? Is their main function mimetic or exemplary?
- Shall we focus on their psychology or on their actions and role within the text?
- How can we characterize characters who are based on real people?
- How can we characterize transtextual characters, and more in general their life *outside* the text within which they were created?
- What is the relationship of characters with their authors, with the text and context in which they were created, with readers?

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Research questions in WP1

- How can we make explicit concepts and practices we informally adopt?
- How does the interpretation of fictional characters influence our reading of a text and of its context, and, on the other hand, how do our values and paradigms influence our interpretation of fictional characters?
- How can we encourage people to cooperate in the preservation and actualization of our cultural heritage?

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Our case studies

- Medieval characters display a high degree of exemplarity: they tend to be archetypes of virtues and/or vices, rather than multifaceted personalities.
- Female characters too display a high degree of exemplarity: they are often the product of a male culture that exploits literature to (among other things) consolidate gender roles. They also primarily exist in relationship with male characters and/or with male authors.
- For centuries characters were not only written by men, but interpreted by men, who often reduced their complexity to stereotypes.

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Beatrice

- Various functions in different texts: childhood crush, saint-like figure, beloved (dead) muse, moral and doctrinal guide, allegory of Theology
- Historical figure vs allegory
- Model of the ‘woman loved by the poet’

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Francesca

- Historical character (?)
- Moral judgement (lustful, bad reader, passionate heroine, archetypical or alive, gendered or non-gendered)
- Protagonist of an immense array of rewritings

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Fiammetta

- Fictional muse or *senhal* of a noble woman?
- No trascendental role, but ethical wisdom and courtly love (desire, reciprocated or unreciprocated love, betrayal, abandonment)
- Different functions in different texts by Boccaccio: addressee, muse, protagonist, reader and writer, teller

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Griselda

- Crucial but ambiguous function in the *Decameron*'s structure
- Allegory of female obedience in Petrarch's rewriting
- Numerous rewritings (various genres), that tend to turn her into a role model

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Goals of WP1

- Create a network of people who are interested in literature (scholars, students, writers, teachers) to document and add values to their theories and good practices
- Compare their different methodologies, vocabularies and approaches (philology, gender studies, narratology etc.) through a formal model
- Foster a new dialogue with other disciplines (analytic philosophy, applied ontology) to consolidate our understanding of characters
- Promote the idea that we can apply a formal approach to the study of literary interpretation, with its complexity, nuances, and subjectivity

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Methodologies of WP1

- Critical survey of literary theory on: characters, Medieval characters, female characters; special focus on interactions with analytic philosophy and formal models
- History of literary criticism, based on our case studies: modelling their approaches in terms of vocabularies, argumentative strategies, topics, observations used in support of an interpretation and dialogue with previous readings
- Collective discussion: requirements and beta-tests

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MITE's labs in Textual Criticism for PhD students

April 11 and 18, 10.00-12.00

Sapienza University of Rome, PhD in Textual Sciences from the Middle Ages to the Modern Era

Gaia Tomazzoli & Emilio Sanfilippo

Formal models for representing vocabularies and methodologies of literary criticism

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MITE's workshop in literary studies

October 10-11, 2024, Sapienza University of Rome

provisionary title: Female characters in Medieval Italian Literature: features, rewritings, and interpretation

Programme to be announced!

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MITE's collaborations

- Sapienza project «*Narrating Women*: Misogyny and Philogyny in Medieval and Early Modern Romance and Middle English Narrative» (PI: prof. G. Paradisi)
- MedioEva: Centro di ricerca interuniversitario per lo studio della letteratura femminile e della donna nelle letterature del medioevo (director: prof. E. Bartoli; Sapienza coordinator: prof. D. Manzoli)
- Lieta brigata: a pedagogic project for a role-play adaptation of Medieval Italian texts (Dante & Boccaccio)
- Linking Dante: a digital project led by ISTI CNR

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Thank you!

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