

Article

Who Tells the Story? Challenging Audiences through Performer Embodiment

U-Wen Low ^{1,2}

¹ Department of Theology and Religion, University of Birmingham, Birmingham B15 2TT, UK; u.low@bham.ac.uk

² Honorary Postdoctoral Associate, Pilgrim Theological College, University of Divinity, Parkville 3052, Australia

Abstract: Visualising a character in a narrative is a highly individual act; cognitive narratology suggests that individuals may construct character models depending on the information (frames) available to them. However, many of these frames are formed from knowledge defined by positivist historical criticism, meaning that construction tends to follow broadly similar patterns. Performing and therefore embodying a character shifts the role of interpretation from audience to performer; an audience engages with the nuances of each performer's embodiment of a character in a shared experience of a temporal performance event. This shift of interpretive responsibility to the performer allows them to challenge audiences in ways that an author may not be able to. Embodiment of a character through performance will inevitably challenge readers' cognitive constructions of the same character to different degrees—for example, gender, ethnicity, bearing, tone, or even action may differ—potentially creating dissonance for audiences. This dissonance may help interpreters to discover their own assumptions about the performed texts, in doing so creating new avenues for interpretation. Such is the promise of performance: by viewing embodied narratives, audiences are challenged to view alternative interpretations and subsequently reconcile differences between their constructions and those of the performers.

Keywords: narrative criticism; performance criticism; biblical performance criticism; biblical interpretation; cognitive narratology; rhetoric; oral tradition



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1. Introduction

The call for papers for this Special Issue put forward a question to writers: “are the differences between Narrative and Performance Criticisms simply a matter of degree or of kind?” To best illustrate and subsequently discuss these differences, I suggest an approach which explores how each criticism engages with character construction. Recent shifts within narrative criticism via cognitive linguistics toward recognising variance of interpretation between sets of readers is a helpful move toward promoting diversity in character construction, yet one that has the potential to re-centre existing hegemonic interpretations of texts.

In contrast, I will argue that the embodiment of a character by a performer challenges audiences to move beyond their mental models for said characters. By confronting an audience with characters whose embodiment may highlight differences between interpretations, performance can provide an additional frame which informs an audience member's construction of a character. Performance criticism thus moves the primary responsibility of textual interpretation from the “reader” to the “performer” or indeed performing company, whose interpretation of the text creates opportunity for generative dialogue and a move away from established interpretations and entrenched ideas. Performance criticism thus complements narrative criticism, creating a feedback loop whereby a performer's embodiment of the text may be informed by narrative criticism, and subsequently an audience member's construction of a character is informed by witnessing a performance.

To make this argument, I will first discuss the recent development of a cognitive-narratological approach within narrative criticism as set out in the 2021 Special Issue of *Biblical Interpretation*, noting the approach's strengths and weaknesses. I will then very briefly outline the different modalities of biblical performance criticism (BPC), noting that scholars have tended to compare narrative criticism to the analytical mode of BPC—an understandable move given these are closely related fields in many ways. I turn to the heuristic and practical modes of BPC to discuss the possibilities which arise when physically performing the text, focusing on the performer as interpreter, as well as the performance event as an arena for meaning-making.

2. Narrative Criticism, Cognitive Linguistics and the Cognitive-Narratological Approach

Narrative criticism is interested in readers and how they respond to texts. David Rhoads, a key figure in both narrative criticism as well as BPC, defines narrative criticism as the “analysis of the storyworld of a narrative” as well as the “analysis of its implied rhetorical impact upon readers” (Rhoads 1999, p. 265). Leif Hongisto later points out that this approach encompasses historical reading, but includes the “additional perspective of the participation of the reader” (Hongisto 2010, p. 17). There is an interplay between narrative and reader; in her introduction to the *Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative*, Danna Fewell points out that narratives are embodied stories which help “carve us out from the rest of reality”, in effect working to impose structure and form upon the chaos of life (Fewell 2016, p. 5). Narratives help readers to make sense of the world, to give meaning to it, and the characters within narratives act as focal points around which readers and their communities may shape identities (Fewell 2016).

However, not all readers are the same, and scholarship is increasingly beginning to recognise that previous attempts to construct an “implied” or “intended” reader often reflect the scholar and more broadly the field rather than an actual person—or as Cornelis Bennema puts it, a “heuristic construct of the modern critic” (Bennema 2021, p. 433). In a more recent development, Jan Runggemeier and Elizabeth Shively suggest a “cognitive-narratological approach” to characterisation in New Testament (NT) narratives (Runggemeier and Shively 2021). They point out that this “cognitive turn” has occurred within narrative criticism to explain how readers think about and engage with texts beyond the written text; they are particularly interested in how readers construct mental models of characters based on a variety of different factors. In other words, this development in narrative criticism recognises that different people read and interpret narratives in very different ways—as such, it is important to begin to understand the factors that affect an individual's construction of a character.

Runggemeier and Shively argue that characters are constructed on the basis of different sources of input, these being textual cues, mental models of persons, and cultural frames, the latter two of which will vary greatly from reader to reader (Runggemeier and Shively 2021). Taking this a step further, Bennema helpfully suggests a range of possible readers, and goes on to construct four hypothetical readers, showing that their interpretations of the character of Peter vary greatly depending on what textual information is available to them (Bennema 2021). Importantly, Bennema acknowledges the importance of “real world” knowledge in constructing characters, pointing out that readers inevitably draw on their own knowledge of human behaviour and “socio-cultural schemata” (Bennema 2021).

This seems like an exciting development, as the cognitive-narratological method being developed in narrative criticism seem to acknowledge that every reader will have their own, unique understanding of a character within the text, formed from a complex mixture of their textual and historical knowledge, as well as paratexts, the reader's own social location, their ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, etc. However, this is quickly diminished as Bennema argues that “hermeneutical control” needs to be retained through knowledge of the 1st-century world. This seems an impossible prospect, and in responding to Runggemeier and Shively as well as Bennema, Suzanne Keen highlights that “actual

contemporary readers" simply do not have enough knowledge to read any biblical text according to these guidelines (Keen 2021, p. 462). As a result, she argues, these actual readers tend to be simply erased by narrative critics.

On the other hand, Bonnie Howe and Eve Sweetser take up Keen's argument that there exists an unbridgeable gap between the first century and 21st, and that the point of cognitive linguistics is to recognise that readers will always need to "construe" an interpretation based on their own knowledge and experience (Howe and Sweetser 2021). They point out that despite the fears of unregulated, decontextualised interpretation of texts, interpreters cannot simply reframe the text however they want, as the text itself sets narrative frames of its own within which the story occurs. Nevertheless, outside of these text-specific frames, they remind us, a reader can construct a character however they want—or as they put it, "nothing generally stops a reader from visualising a character with blue eyes, if the text doesn't describe the character's eyes as brown" (Howe and Sweetser 2021).

The cognitive-narratological approach thus moves scholars away from constructing an idealised "reader" and toward recognising that every person interprets the text differently, resulting in a vast array of possible constructions of a character. This is an important move; however, it seems unlikely that a wide variety of readings will flourish. This is for a complex set of reasons. Firstly, as Jeremy Schipper and other narrative scholars point out, characters in the biblical narrative tend to be "underdescribed" (Schipper 2016, p. 389). Schipper convincingly argues that this results in normativised constructions of characters by readers unless explicitly described otherwise—specifically, the prevailing assumption that characters are "non-disabled", meaning that disability is utilised as a plot point rather than as a natural part of a character's being. Schipper's argument naturally extends to characteristics other than disability and attractiveness; the lack of description surrounding characters mean that certain norms can be easily overlaid onto them.

A helpful additional consideration is Stephen Moore's somewhat technical summation of Scott Elliott's critique of characterisation in narrative criticism, as an "unproblematized reflection of the post-Cartesian Western concept of individual interiorized human subjectivity" whereby the "naturalized, reified, undeconstructed concept of self predetermines not only narrative-critical construals of literary characters in the gospels and other ancient narratives, but also construals of the historical persons assumed to underlie these characters, not least the historical Jesus" (Moore 2016, p. 40). In other words, Moore suggests that readers have a tendency to unconsciously and anachronistically apply ideas concerning self-identity to characters in biblical narratives, in doing so making assumptions about them—their motivations, interior life, and resultantly other characteristics.

Taken together, these critiques point out that readers have a tendency to construct characters if not in our own image, then certainly in the way we would like to see them—or more insidiously, how we have been told we *should* see them by decades of scholarly work. Because the text does not give us lengthy descriptions of Jonah, we can project an image upon him—and this image by and large conforms to what society considers "normal", which preferences certain ideas of physicality, ethnicity, beauty. Because the text does not tell us about Judas' thoughts, we assume that his motivations are selfish rather than altruistic, as we judge his actions by modern standards of morality. Our constructions are thus influenced in large part by our own norms; this applies not only to lay readers but also to academics.

This is concerning. The scholarly guild by and large continues to insist on creating scholars in its own image, trained in "classical" methods of biblical studies which prioritise historical positivism and Western traditions (Tolbert 2013)—or, as Greg Carey more pointedly puts it, "whiteness constitutes one fundamental constituent of that [interpretive] centre" (Carey 2013, p. 5). The assumed sets of knowledge from which many biblical scholars work preference English, French, and German, causing what Hedges calls a "Euronormative" bias in the academy (Hedges 2020). Many scholarly interpretations unknowingly assert these assumptions and norms upon the biblical texts—echoing Bennema's call for hermeneutical control—such that the assumed default position of an interpreter

is that of a white male, with scholars who do not fit this position expected to identify their social location (Tolbert 2013). This means that it is rare for diverse (or non-white, or non-positivist) biblical interpretations to occur, and when they do, they are at risk of being stifled for being insufficiently rigorous, or as Carey points out, consistently minoritised and treated as an interesting diversion from real work.

Though the cognitive-narratological turn is important and helpful in challenging this status quo by acknowledging that readers may well interpret the text differently based on their social location, it does not do enough to influence or challenge reader constructions, meaning that certain biases will continue to be perpetuated. Given the ongoing dominance of Western traditions within the academy (even the dominance of English as the primary language of the guild), interpreters are continually pushed toward white-centred constructions of characters. At the same time, as the dialogue within the Special Issue shows, there is still significant impetus toward the need for an “educated” reader, with a sense that lay (non-Western educated) readers will simply do a bad job of interpreting the texts because they do not have the right cultural frames to approach the text “correctly”. Thus, the problem falls into a perpetual cycle: one needs to be in the guild to challenge dominant paradigms, but in order to come into the guild, one needs to learn to think a certain way based on dominant paradigms, and is therefore less likely to challenge dominant paradigms.

This is a problem which I suggest BPC may help to address by relocating the conversation away from individual interpretation to communal viewing. I do not wish to suggest that the cognitive turn within narrative criticism is unhelpful or unnecessary; far from it, I suggest that BPC complements these important developments in narrative criticism by shifting focus: rather than the onus of interpretation resting upon readers, whose constructions of character tend to live within their imaginations, performance places the burden upon the performer/s, with two helpful outcomes: (1) the creation of a temporal performance event whereby characterisation becomes less ambiguous as it spills out from the performer’s imagination into reality, allowing a central locus for understanding and subsequent re-readings, and (2) the physical embodiment of characters, which confronts audiences with interpretations which may be radically different to their own. Performance also defies normativity and may allow for creative imaginings which challenge existing biases.

3. The Analytical Mode of Biblical Performance Criticism

In his comprehensive survey of BPC, Peter Perry points out that BPC can be grouped into three distinct “modes”: the “analytical”, the “heuristic”, and the “practical” (Perry 2019). Each of these modes utilise different epistemologies, with different goals in view: the analytical mode casts a performance-oriented lens on historical-critical analysis of texts with the goal of uncovering links to ancient performances, the heuristic reflects upon contemporary performances of biblical texts and their effect upon both performer and audience, and the practical is a catchall term which captures practically oriented performances (such as in liturgical settings). Perry notes also that the discipline is rapidly diversifying (Perry 2019)—however, as a result of this diversity, one of the challenges facing scholars is BPC’s lack of a systematic “method”. This is both a strength and weakness, and is celebrated by BPC scholars as it allows for a greater variety in approaches. Space does not permit a full discussion of BPC as a field, and interested readers should look to Perry’s survey for guidance.

Perry argues that BPC is in effect the result of a convergence of several different historical-critical sub-disciplines (Perry 2016), incorporating elements from form criticism, oral criticism, rhetorical criticism, and narrative criticism. Indeed, it could be argued that BPC is a direct descendant of narrative criticism thanks largely to the figure of David M. Rhoads, whose co-authored *Mark as Story* (Rhoads and Michie 1982; Rhoads et al. 2012) would, among other key texts, set the scene for the discipline of narrative criticism (Moore 2016, p. 28). Rhoads is also widely acknowledged as one of the seminal scholars within the field of BPC, beginning perhaps with his recorded one-person performance of Mark

from the 1970s and including several journal articles from the 2000s on the then-emerging discipline. Indeed, his narrative-critical work points to the need for performers and their own role in interpreting texts for an audience (Rhoads 1999, p. 278).

The analytical mode of BPC utilises largely the same set of tools available to the historical-critical scholar, with one key difference: BPC is interested largely in recovering performance elements within the biblical texts. This largely happens in two ways: either by highlighting features of the text which might act as performance markers, or by theorising how the text might have been transmuted from performed material to a written (and therefore static) medium (Mathews 2014). BPC therefore draws upon historical-critical work in ancient media, orality, memory, theatre studies, and other disciplines in order to study the interplay between performance and text. The analytical mode of BPC relies upon careful historical-critical work, and indeed this performance-oriented (or perhaps media-oriented) perspective offers new avenues of research.

Of course, there are different approaches within this mode depending on one's perspective on "performance" and "composition"; for example, Larry Hurtado and Kelly Iverson have debated the interplay between orality and silent reading in the 1st century CE (Hurtado 2014; Iverson 2016). Here, we can locate one key distinguishing feature of BPC: nowadays, most performance critics will insist upon the "fundamental orality" of the biblical texts (Rhoads and Dewey 2014, p. 10), to the point of arguing that these texts were intended to be performed before an audience—and some go so far as to theorise "performance events" in the 1st century CE (de Waal 2015; Eberhart 2023; Shiner 2003; Whitenton 2016). Space does not permit a full exploration of these arguments, but an important consideration that results from this insistence on actual performance is the performance's effect upon the audience—similar to narrative criticism's interest in the narrative's effect upon the reader.

Aside from the focus on orality, the analytical mode of BPC is functionally similar to narrative criticism, albeit with a slightly different focus—rather than honing in on characters and readers (though these are by no means ignored), BPC is interested in exploring the interplay between performance and text—how texts might have been composed for or in performance, how performance-related media are connected to texts, and the way texts are interpreted. For example, Tom Boomershine shows that the performer of John's Gospel directly addresses audiences whilst embodying Jesus, in doing so appealing to them as though they were Jews to believe in Jesus' messiahship (Boomershine 2022b). This way of thinking about the audience, he argues, suggests that the text is addressed to diaspora Jewish communities across the Roman Empire. BPC therefore allows for new perspectives to emerge.

I suggest that there is room also for a mindset which falls between the analytic and heuristic, and indeed is also accessed in each mode: where the scholar is able to use both their own expertise as well as textual frames to speculate on how performers might embody characters in different ways, and the resultant changes in interpretation—for example, as Holly Hearon does in exploring characterisation in John, or Mathews in engaging with various Hebrew Bible texts (Hearon 2014; Mathews 2012, 2019). A helpful way of thinking about this mindset might be to borrow a phrase from William Doan and Terry Giles: the "performance mode of thought", a mindset which acknowledges the oral, performed origins of texts and seeks to draw conclusions from said orality (Doan and Giles 2005, p. 5). This mindset is employed to some extent by all BPC scholars and practitioners; it allows scholars (and performers) to theorise and suggest outcomes from an informed perspective, and it guides performers in making performative choices. This is akin to a historically informed narrative inquiry which constructs characters within the bounds of cultural frames.

On the other hand, the remaining two modes of BPC are quite different, as they focus on actual rather than theoretical performances. As a result, we see interpretation move from theoretical construction to grounded reality as scholars and performers begin to make decisions about *how* they will embody particular characters.

4. Performing Texts: The Heuristic and Practical Modes of BPC

Both the heuristic and practical modes of BPC are centred around *performing* the text, albeit in different ways: Perry argues that the heuristic mode is primarily undertaken by scholars to draw out audience and performer reflections on a performance, whereas the practical mode is more of a catchall term that encompasses various other ways the text might be performed in a non-scholarly setting (Perry 2019). Two definitions of performance are helpful considerations: firstly, from a theatre studies perspective, Richard Bauman points out that “performance usually suggests an aesthetically marked and heightened mode of communication, framed in a special way and put on display for an audience” (Bauman 1994, p. 41). Secondly, from a BPC perspective, Perry defines performance as “a communication event re-expressing traditions for an audience” (Perry 2019, p. 1).

Notable across both definitions are two key elements: the communication and the audience. In simplest terms, performance involves a person or people communicating *something* in a particular way to an audience. From a narrower BPC perspective, this “something” is almost always the biblical text. The text itself is a known quantity; what is of particular interest is the communicator (the performer/s) and the audience.

Here, we find a common factor across all modes of BPC: all are interested in the effect upon the audience. Where the analytical mode aims to recreate the impact upon the 1st-century audience, and present hypothetical reconstructions of 1st-century performance settings, the heuristic mode assesses the impact from live performances of the text with audiences contemporary to the scholar (though this, too, is changing as filmed performances become increasingly accessible online). Scholars will stage performances to “study the pluriformity of meaning-making” (Perry 2019, p. 11); these staged performances create interpretive opportunities that silent reading simply does not. The practical mode, of course, is the lived experience of texts being contextualised into everyday life.

The heuristic mode tends to be rather difficult to locate within scholarship, and more often occurs in a pedagogical or academic setting where scholars have the opportunity to lead classes through a close reading of a text, or perform the text for their peers. When it is recorded and written about in scholarly literature, it is almost inevitably undertaken by “scholar-performers” who draw insights from both performing as well as historical-critical approaches (Perry 2016; Rhoads 2010; Maxwell 2022; Barbarick 2022; Winedt 2022; Boomershine 2022a; Swanson and Fitzsimmons 2022; Agnew and Swanson 2020).

The practical mode, in contrast, happens all the time wherever Christianity is practiced—in pulpits, in small group settings, in church halls and on the streets. Practitioners need no formal training or qualifications to perform the text; indeed, the text is widely available to all people and so can be picked up and acted out by just about anyone. We see a range of variance, then, between types of practical performances: from the simplified Christmas nativity or Easter scenes which often eliminate distinctions between gospel texts to present a single narrative, to formal lectionary readings in liturgical settings, to selected quotations at wedding ceremonies.

5. The Performer as Interpreter

Whenever a biblical text is performed, performers make interpretive choices in how they represent characters. This is something that Rhoads addresses even in his narrative-critical work, arguing that the performer in effect embodies a character in order to “clarify the differing points of view”, in so doing effectively becoming the character and drawing out “emotive dimensions” of the text (Rhoads 1999, p. 278). Given the narrative frames of the text, these choices are to some extent limited (though as we will see, many remain); however, some choices remain which need to be made by the performer in a way that they feel best represents the character in the narrative they are portraying.

One way that performers undertake this task is to move beyond simple character studies or even reconstruction of textual worlds; they choose to embody and therefore *become* the character (Whitenton 2016; Iverson 2013; Eberhart 2023; Boomershine 2011). Performers feel the characters’ emotions, see with their eyes, and experience the narrative events as though firsthand. To describe this process, scholar-performer Sarah Agnew

describes an approach that she titles “embodied performance analysis” (EPA). This aims to bring the “whole human person” to the task of interpretation (Agnew and Swanson 2020); notably, this is not dissimilar to the aims set out of cognitive narratology. Agnew argues that this type of immersion in the text will allow scholars to eventually achieve an “intuitive understanding” of the text (Agnew and Swanson 2020, p. 21). In doing so, the performer begins to visualise how they will perform the text, beginning to make interpretive decisions based on their existing frames as well as their embodiment of the character.

Not only does the performer embody the character insofar as they immerse themselves in the narrative, but the performer also embodies the character for the audience—the performer is tasked with translating their own mental construction of a character to physical action and dialogue, inhabiting the character in front of an audience (Iverson 2013; Boomershine 2011, p. 124). This moves the narrative from being a hypothetical construct in which interpretation occurs in the reader’s imagination, to becoming a fixed reality centred around a particular point in time, with the performer/s taking on the task of interpretation. There are a number of different aspects of interpretation required beyond the narrative frame, as Agnew hints above—performers need to make careful and deliberate choices about how they represent the characters, and each choice represents an interpretation. Not all choices are conscious or free, either—some are dictated by necessity, or context, or the performer’s level of engagement with the text. As Agnew points out, some choices are intuitive.

On a macro level, there are choices to be made about setting, the number of performers, clothing, language, adherence to particular translations of the text, set design, lighting, and audience size. On a micro level, there are choices concerning inflection, gesture, positioning within scenes, location on stage, voice, etc. Every one of these choices affects the way the audience will perceive and understand the performance, and represents the performer’s attempt to faithfully embody a character before an audience. When a character is performed, audiences must find ways to reconcile the performer’s interpretation of the character with their own, or to reject it. In cognitive-narratological terms, each performer’s interpretive choices creates a model of a character which may either contribute toward or challenge audience members’ own mental models of said character.

To provide an example, I turn to a public lecture given by my esteemed former colleague Rikk Watts in 2018. In this lecture, Watts pointed out to the audience that there were several different ways one might choose to perform Jesus’ calming of the storm in Mark 4:35–41, each of which would reflect a performer’s Christology and at the same time might inform an audience member’s Christological models. A performer might interpret Jesus as stern, fully in command, and pitch their voice and actions accordingly—in this embodiment, Jesus would slowly stand after being awoken, raise his arms, and use a loud but controlled voice to call out for silence. The disciples’ fear and subsequent reaction would therefore be closer to a sense of awe at the majesty of Jesus’ power.

On the other hand, Watts pointed out, one could also interpret Jesus as a person who had just been awoken from a deep sleep. Such an embodiment would portray Jesus as frazzled, annoyed, raising his voice to exclaim “shut up!” to the storm, at which point calm would descend. The disciples’ reaction would therefore be genuine terror—first from being shouted at by their teacher, but moving swiftly to a realisation of Jesus’ true power in that his wild command for peace was heeded by the wind and the sea. Both interpretations of Jesus are valid within the narrative frame of the Markan pericope, within the broader narrative of the entire Gospel, and within the cultural frames of the 1st century CE. However, each interpretation clearly contributes to a very different mental model of Jesus.

Whilst both of these interpretations could certainly be drawn out from a narrative-critical reading of the text, I suggest that most people would tend to construct a Jesus who is in control, whose admonishment is gentle and perhaps a little vexed. The physical embodiment of the character—especially when one shouts and gestures—challenges an individual’s self-imagined model by centring someone else’s interpretation of the character

in a way that brooks no argument. This embodiment completely removes most interpretive choices from the audience, and forces them to confront the reality of a Jesus who reacts the same way that everyone else does when awakened by panicked companions.

I suggest that performance therefore creates two opportunities that narrative criticism may not: firstly, the performance event creates a unique temporal experience where every audience member is responding to a shared frame (i.e., the performance frame) rather than coming together to compare mental constructions, allowing for a fixed reference point in which some interpretive ambiguities have been resolved; secondly, the performer's body and choices in embodying a character allows them to directly contest existing audience mental models, thereby forcing re-evaluation of meaning. To reinforce the implications for both possibilities, I will briefly engage with a performance of Philemon.

5.1. Case Study: An Afro-Caribbean Performance of Philemon

At the SBL Annual Meeting in November 2022, participants in the Performance Criticism of Biblical and Other Ancient Texts (PC-BOAT) seminar experienced a performance of Philemon by Marlon Winedt, a Black Caribbean scholar (Winedt 2022).¹ Winedt's performance was a simple one: in front of a group of scholars in a conference setting, he stepped in front of the assembled audience and delivered the epistle with occasional consultation of notes, without props or any other scene-setting. Winedt did not simply recite the text, but decided to fully embody Paul's oration, which he had translated himself. He pointed to audience members as Paul named members of the congregation, including them in the performance; he pitched his voice and used facial expressions to indicate irony and sarcasm. He used his own body to illustrate the text, most notably in verse 12 (which Winedt chose to translate as "as if I am ripping out my own insides to send back to you!").

Performing in front of a scholarly audience, Winedt's performance was able to draw out certain aspects of the text: firstly, humour, which Paul (via Winedt) uses to draw in and disarm his wider audience. Secondly, the sense of social responsibility which Paul leverages to coerce Philemon was highlighted as Winedt pointed to members of the audience and made them participants in the oration, including Paul's witnesses to the epistle in verses 23 and 24. Thirdly, Winedt chose to highlight Paul's sense of emotion and passion regarding Onesimus, raising his voice and gesticulating at appropriate points. Finally, Winedt's own social location as a Black Caribbean performing an epistle addressing slavery added a significant dimension to the text which I will go on to discuss.

5.1.1. The Shared Experience(s) of a Performance Event

When viewing a performance, the audience is presented with the performer's interpretation of characters in the text; as the performer actively makes choices, certain interpretive ambiguities are erased. In the case study above, significant interpretive decisions were made by the performer: Winedt chose to depict a Paul who was using every rhetorical tool available to coerce Philemon into going above and beyond his duties in setting Onesimus free, rather than a Paul who was punishing Onesimus by forcing him to return to Philemon. Winedt also made it clear that he viewed this epistle as intended to be read aloud in a communal setting by his choice to include the audience in his performance, foregrounding his assumption of orality as well as community engagement with the text.

Since performance creates a shared starting point, discussion among the audience can move quickly beyond basic issues to reflecting on what has been presented to them. Certain historical-critical issues will have been settled or bypassed by the performer either before or during the performance, and other ambiguities are made clear by the performer's interpretive choices, meaning that audiences are free to focus on who the characters are, and what they are doing—that is, their embodiment by the performer. For example, Iverson (2013) argues that the storyteller "lures" the audience into participation through embodiment, and even chastises them. We find here a substantial difference between narrative criticism and performance criticism—where narrative criticism tends to be a solitary affair

conducted between a text and a reader, performance almost always takes place before an audience and so creates an opportunity for group interpretation or discussion.

Instead of the text, the performance event becomes the main object of inquiry. Any discussion that results is sharper and more focused given there is a shared reference point, rather than audience members having to find the language to translate their imaginary character models to others. Though this type of discussion can still fall prey to Euronormative biases, it creates opportunity for other voices to join the conversation. A feedback loop occurs between performer, text, and audience, which both Perry (2016) and Mathews (2012, 2020) adapt from Dwight Conquergood's (2002) work on performance studies to acknowledge the interplay between all elements. In interpreting the text, the performer adapts their performance to the audience, who likewise respond to the performer, influencing and affecting one another.

5.1.2. The Embodied Challenge

Embodiment via performance confronts an audience with character models which are inherently different to their own, and in a way that is experiential and grounded in reality. Instead of hearing their chosen voice for a character, an audience must listen to the performer's voice; even if they have always constructed certain characters with normative characteristics, an audience must reckon with a performer's body. Even if an audience member completely rejects these alternate models, the performance has inserted new data into the frames they use to construct mental models. This, alone, is a helpful and important act.

In Winedt's performance, we are presented with a dark-skinned Paul who is passionate, resourceful, and who is willing to use his social capital to achieve results for some measure of justice. This may confront an audience whose previous mental model of Paul may have been a white authoritarian leader, who was happy to be complicit in the ongoing oppression of Onesimus. Some interpreters may never have seen Paul in the way Winedt presented him, and may not have possessed the right frames to envision him thusly. Winedt's embodiment of the character therefore provides them with a new reference point, or data, which needs to be incorporated into or rejected by their existing mental models of the character.

Embodying a character can raise important questions regarding social norms and classes which may have been mentally smoothed over by readers for whom Eurocentric reading has been normalised. This happens on several different levels, ranging from decisions made about context and setting, to the body of the performer. Take, for example, a Paul who is embodied by a performer identifying as gender nonconforming—a choice which is certainly justifiable according to modern readings of the Pauline corpus. A reader might hypothetically be able to imagine such a Paul, but may also find it difficult to consistently draw out interpretive nuances or implications especially if they are distant from this portrayal. When performed, however, differences in interpretation are highlighted not only by the performer's choices, but also because of their social location and identity. Paul's engagement with gender issues takes on a more personal, immediate, and radically different tone when performed by a queer person; they may, for example, choose to highlight that Galatians 3:28 uses "and" (καί) to signify gender exists across a spectrum (male *and* female) in contrast to the remaining items on the list which are designated as binaries (Jew *or* Greek) using "or" (οὐδέ). This take on Paul has implications not only for a performance of Galatians, but the remainder of Paul's letters and perhaps even Acts.

The challenge of embodiment can be further heightened when performers with intersecting identities play roles which are textually "underdescribed" yet are themselves intersectional. The Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 might be embodied by a non-white, gender nonconforming performer; such a performance would highlight that Philip baptises a person who not only challenges gender heteronormativity, but is of a different skin colour to him, and who is already in a position to read the scriptures. This challenges not only our interpretation of characters, but also our theology: what might it mean to see a non-white,

gender nonconforming character be baptised, and go on their way without being told to repent or change their ways?

Embodiment thus can challenge almost every aspect of a person's mental model of a character, from socio-economic through to gender, ethnicity, sexuality, status, and disability. In their portrayals, performers challenge audience interpretations on more than just the words of the text; they can challenge inherent assumptions held about the characters, and therefore their motivations. This has the potential to affect more than a single text, as characters are not always isolated to a single text (as Bennema has shown), meaning that an impactful performance may entirely shift the way a person understands a character, and therefore the way they interpret their words.

Other examples abound. The parable of the Good Samaritan, and indeed much of the biblical text, takes on different dimensions if it is performed by sets of actors from historically opposed people groups. The performance of Lamentations or Genesis is given additional resonance when performed by Indigenous people historically displaced by settler colonialism. Jesus and his disciples are understood very differently when embodied by white men in contrast to people of colour.

In BPC, *who* performs and *how* they perform become the focus of interpretation as much as the text they are performing, and these performers can radically reshape others' understanding of the texts. Given the aforementioned "underdescribing" of characters in the biblical texts, numerous possibilities exist within textual frames, waiting to be leveraged by the right performers. Performance represents a method for creating interpretations and visualisations of texts that cannot be controlled, and cannot be sequestered in the same way that books, journal articles, or presentations can. Performance moves the act of interpretation away from the act of reading, and toward a more participatory medium of interpretation, with the potential of itself being understood as text.

6. Conclusions: From Imagination to Interpretation

Neither narrative criticism nor performance criticism is rendered redundant by the other; van Oyen argues that performance criticism can only happen on the basis of narrative criticism as both exist in a mutually interpretive relationship (Van Oyen 2016), and to a certain extent this is valid. As we have seen, the analytical mode of performance criticism stems from, and largely continues to draw upon, principles laid down in narrative criticism, but subsequently other modes of BPC move the narrative beyond the boundaries of the reader's mind to embody the characters in a performance event. Placed together, the two approaches generate increasing possibilities for interpretation—though this requires readers to draw upon the totality of BPC rather than just one aspect or another.

A performance-oriented interpretive strategy places an important burden on performers as the interpreters of texts. Here, the criticism I addressed to the cognitive-narratological method remains unresolved in many ways, as the onus for "hermeneutical control" and appropriate knowledge has simply shifted from reader to performer. Nevertheless, there is sufficient leeway within the texts for significant variance in embodiment given the "underdescribed" nature of many characters; the average performer has no need for the formal bounds of narrative criticism in order to interpret the characters, instead bringing their whole selves to bear in a way that draws out unique nuances.

Performance has the power to confront audiences with embodied interpretations of characters which conflict with their own mental models. By embodying characters and making key interpretive decisions, performers and their performance events become the main objects of interpretation, decentring the text. Herein lies an opportunity for audiences to be challenged in ways that readers may not be, as performance moves the narrative out of the realm of imagination and into a temporally bound, shared reality. Performance can subvert dominant interpretations of characters and in doing so cause interpreters to rethink their existing mental models of characters.

By giving freedom to performers, and by making them and their performances the primary object of inquiry, BPC creates a new set of interpretive opportunities as it foregrounds

mental models of characters that are inherently different to our own, which can often be shaped by Eurocentric norms and other invisible forces. Rather than being confined to an individual's imagination, performance generates creative friction before a gathered audience, forcing them to reckon with this difference. To an extent, even radical difference creates opportunity rather than chaos, as audiences are moved to explore a performer's motivations and interpretive frames—and therefore, their own. Performance thus contests dominant paradigms, subsequently unlocking the potential for further imaginative attempts based on these contestations. The obverse may also hold true: audiences may reject interpretations too divergent from their own; even this generates opportunity for discussion by inserting new data into interpretive frames.

Performance criticism is by no means a silver bullet, and neither is performance itself. Though the performance event creates a shared experience from which meaning-making can be derived, the nature of performance ensures that each performance event will be uniquely contextualised to its audience. This creates a possibility that different sets of audiences may be faced with different performances depending on context; this variability helps underscore the fact that performance is a different medium entirely to text on page. Moving forward, BPC needs to more carefully engage with theatre studies to better understand the techniques that performers use to make decisions about how to play a character, as much of this work is carried out by practitioners in the practical mode rather than scholar-performers. Kelly Iverson's *Performing Christian Literature* (Iverson 2021) begins to engage with some of these questions. Given the positioning of BPC within the scholarly guild, it is not immune to the guild's Eurocentrism, and needs to keep finding ways to prioritise non-white performers and their interpretations.

Ultimately, narrative criticism and performance criticism are perhaps best deployed in tandem for the best possible outcome. Given the performer's role as interpreter, it is helpful for performers to engage with narrative criticism to aid their interpretive efforts, as doing so alerts them to some of the possibilities within the textual frames. At the same time, narrative critics should pay close attention to how performers are embodying characters in ways that fall outside their imagination.

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- ¹ Winedt's performance can also be viewed on the Biblical Performance Criticism website: <https://www.biblicalperformancecriticism.org/index.php/47-performance-video/490-performing-philemon-a-rhetoric-of-accommodation-or-of-crypto-revolution> (accessed on 12 July 2023).

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