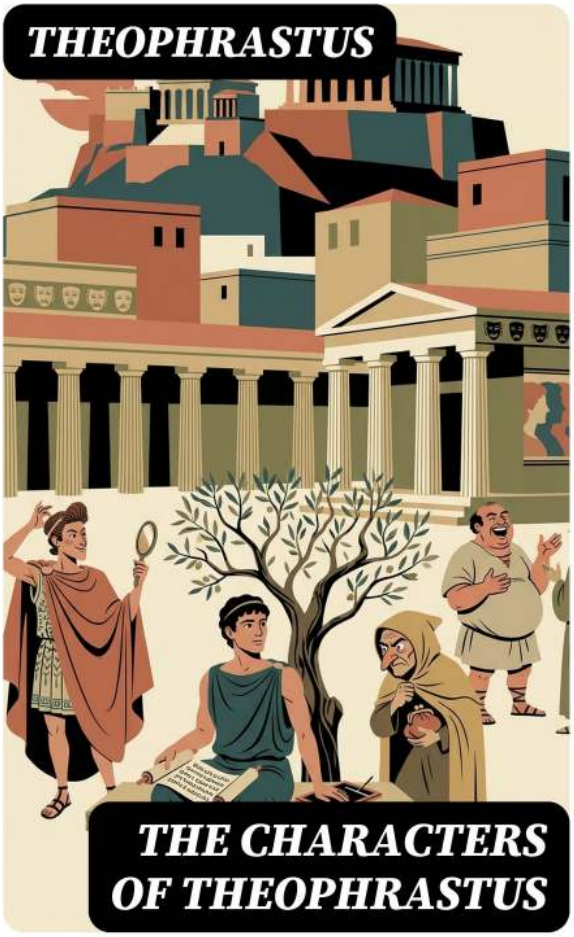
THEOPHRASTUS

THE CHARACTERS OF THEOPHRASTUS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The Characters of Theophrastus

Enriched edition. A Translation, with Introduction

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Colin Finch

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Introduction

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This collection gathers, in one place, the complete extant set of Theophrastus’s Characters together with the paratexts that commonly frame the work for readers: a Preface, an Introduction, and an Epistle Dedicatory. Its purpose is not to present the author’s entire oeuvre, but to offer a focused edition of a single, influential book and the materials that explain it. By assembling these pieces, the volume provides both a reliable reading text and an orientation to its historical and literary contexts, enabling readers to encounter the sketches as a coherent project while understanding how they have been introduced, justified, and received across generations.

Theophrastus, a student of Aristotle and his successor at the Lyceum, wrote widely across philosophy and natural science. The Characters occupies a distinct place among his works as a compact series of ethical portraits rather than a systematic treatise. Composed as brief studies of recognizable dispositions in civic life, the sketches portray types of behavior rather than individual biographies. Their emphasis falls on manners, speech, and recurring habits, offering a practical taxonomy of everyday conduct. In presenting them together, this collection foregrounds the author’s sustained interest in observable ethos—how a person’s patterns of action reveal moral tendencies within shared social spaces.

Several text types appear here. The Preface and the Introduction are expository essays that situate the work: they clarify aims, historical background, and interpretive approaches. The Epistle Dedicatory is a letter addressing the work to an intended audience, stating reasons for publication and hoped-for use. The core of the volume, the Characters of Theophrastus, consists of short prose sketches. They are neither poems nor narratives, and they are not plays; they are concise rhetorical portraits built from definition and example, designed for reflection and for instruction in reading character as a set of outwardly visible traits.

The sequence presented—from the Dissembler through the Vicious Man—maps a spectrum of recognizable social types. Each sketch typically begins by delimiting a trait, then accumulates instances in brief scenes: moments at the market, on the street, in civic meetings, at dinner, or during rituals. The form is deliberately schematic. It invites readers to discern the repeating pattern that makes a type intelligible. By gathering all thirty pieces in order, the collection restores the work’s taxonomic breadth, allowing cross-comparison among related dispositions and revealing how variations of speech, gesture, and timing distinguish neighboring kinds of fault.

Across the book, unifying themes emerge. Theophrastus is concerned with measure and excess, with propriety in public and private, with how self-interest distorts judgment, and with the ways fear, vanity, credulity, or pride appear in ordinary exchanges. The civic world of the polis provides the arena in which these tendencies show themselves. Rather

than catalog hidden motives, the sketches dwell on outward behavior—what is said, when and where, to whom, and with what effect. The result is an ethics of everyday life: a portrait of character as conduct, visible in recurring habits that others can witness, evaluate, and learn from.

Stylistically, the Characters is marked by brevity, clarity, and accumulation. Theophrastus writes in compact sentences that advance by example, preferring concrete situations to abstract argument. The tone is often dry, sometimes gently comic, yet consistently restrained. The technique relies on contrast and repetition: a trait is put under pressure in varied circumstances to reveal its constancy. This method resists psychological speculation. Instead, it trusts observable signs—timing, place, manner, and speech—to disclose a disposition. The sketches thus read as carefully staged demonstrations, balancing ethical insight with the economy of a handbook.

The settings in which conduct is observed are themselves instructive. The agora, the law courts, religious observances, domestic meals, and encounters on the road recur as testing grounds for character. Public rituals expose scruples and anxieties; convivial gatherings reveal tact or its absence; transactions and petitions display fairness, vanity, or aggression. By distributing scenes across these shared institutions, Theophrastus binds ethics to civic practice. The types are intelligible because the city supplies common expectations. Readers see how a habit becomes a public fact, how a fault inconveniences others, and how social norms register and correct excess.

Theophrastus’s method proved foundational for later literature. The practice of “character-writing” in antiquity and the early modern period drew directly from this model of typological portraiture. Moralists and essayists adapted the sketch form to their own languages and societies, and the book’s influence can be traced in traditions that describe generic figures to illuminate manners and mores. Its legacy extends into comedy, satire, and the essay, where recognizable social types supply structure and critique. By preserving the complete set, this collection lets readers see the source from which those later traditions took shape and measure their continuities and departures.

Beyond its literary afterlife, the Characters is a primary source for historians of language, law, religion, and daily life in classical Athens. Technical terms for vices, details of etiquette, and glimpses of institutional practice make the book a compact dossier of social evidence. Because the sketches rely on conventions that a contemporary audience shared, they preserve what that audience took for granted. Scholars use them to triangulate norms of civility, expectations of piety, and the tacit rules governing speech in assemblies and private dealings. Read alongside other evidence, they enrich our understanding of civic culture and moral vocabulary.

The present arrangement encourages readers to treat the sketches as discrete but resonant units. There is no overarching narrative and no progression toward a single conclusion. Instead, the order invites comparison: how the shameless differs from the impudent, how the garrulous contrasts with the bore, how suspicion departs from prudent

caution. The types are ideals in the descriptive sense—patterns distilled from observation. They are not exhaustive portraits of persons, and they do not aim to judge every circumstance. Recognizing this helps readers receive the work as an exercise in clarity about conduct rather than as a catalogue of offenses.

The accompanying paratexts serve practical ends. A Preface frames the rationale for presenting the material in this form. An Introduction supplies context for authorship, form, and reception, and outlines key terms used throughout. An Epistle Dedicatory, as a letter, speaks to audience and purpose, modeling how the text has been historically offered to readers. Together these materials aid orientation without substituting for the sketches themselves. They also explain editorial choices such as the order of pieces and the standardization of titles, enabling a consistent point of reference for discussion and citation.

The aim of this collection is clarity, completeness, and usefulness. By uniting the Characters with explanatory front matter, it provides a compact guide to a classic of ethical description. Readers will find an art of seeing: how conduct, repeated across occasions, becomes character. They will also see why the work endures—its lucidity, its economy, and its steady attention to public life. Whether approached for literary history, moral reflection, or rhetorical study, the volume offers both a faithful presentation of Theophrastus’s sketches and the tools needed to situate them among the lasting forms of prose that they helped to define.

Author Biography

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Theophrastus (c. 371–287 BCE) was a Greek philosopher from Eresus on Lesbos, best known as Aristotle’s successor at the Lyceum and as the author of the Characters, a classic of ethical observation. Trained within the Peripatetic circle, he wrote widely across logic, physics, ethics, rhetoric, and natural history; only a fraction survives. His botanical treatises earned him the later epithet “father of botany,” while his sketches of moral types offered a compact anthropology of Athenian life. Living through the turbulent years after Alexander, he helped stabilize and extend the empirical, classificatory spirit of the Lyceum, combining acute observation with a practical interest in how people actually behave.

Raised in the intellectual orbit of the Aegean and educated at Athens, Theophrastus became a close associate of Aristotle, to whom ancient sources attribute his new name—“Theophrastus,” the divinely phrased—replacing his birth name, Tyrtamus. After Aristotle’s departure from Athens, he was chosen to lead the Lyceum, likely around 322 BCE, and presided over it for decades. He cultivated a large circle of students and collaborators, systematizing research programs initiated by his teacher. Under his direction, the Lyceum continued its method of collecting examples, assembling descriptions, and reasoning from observed particulars to general patterns, an approach that shaped his surviving ethical and scientific works.