

## **The Characters**

### **by Theophrastus**

The *Characters* or *Ethikoi Characteres* by Theophrastus, Aristotle's student and successor as the head of the Lyceum (Lykeion), is a small book that has nevertheless had a significant impact across the ages. It is the first to analyze characters using an approach that comes so close to psychoanalysis, and shows a character's behaviour in the light of the moral flaw it is branded with. It also shows its relation with society and how far people accept or repel such a character.

The book is so condensed that the reader would suspect the writer to have withheld information or further details. In fact, what Theophrastus provides makes readers eager for more as they are amused by its true-to-life portrayal. This book inspired Menander (Menandros) as a number of researchers contend that the Greek dramatist drew heavily on *Ethikoi Characteres* in portraying his comic characters, especially as he was a friend and student of Theophrastus.

*Ethikoi Characteres* describes the behavior of thirty characters each with a moral flaw that Theophrastus brilliantly analyzes, revealing the distinctive features of their actions. His style is lucid, but also requires great effort to understand its subtle purpose and implications.

The hardest problem readers may encounter is the close resemblance between the features of one character flaw and another. Three flaws overlap to the extent that some readers fail to accurately distinguish between them: the frugal (mikrologos), the niggardly (aneleutheros), and the miserly (aischerokerdês). In our Arab cultural heritage, the three shades are classified

under miserliness, but Theophrastus contradistinguishes them with rare skill, describing the traits that make each one different from the other two. Further, the Greek words for the three character flaws help the reader perceive the subtle differences between them.

Similarly, the behaviour of three characters is marked by hypocrisy, namely; the hypocrite (*eirôn*), the flatterer (*kolax*), and the sycophant (*areskos*). Another trio is characterized by pride and conceit: the boastful (*mikrophilotimos*), the conceited (*alazôn*), and the arrogant (*hyperêphanos*). The behaviour of six other characters can be described as rough, insolent and obscene. These are the impertinent (*authadês*), the unrefined (*agroikos*), the low (*aponenoêmenos*), the loathsome (*bdelyros*), the repugnant (*duscherês*), and the impudent (*aêdês*). Also, there are five characters whose behaviour exhibits dullness and degradation: the crude (*akaios*), the prying (*periergos*), the shameless (*anaischyntos*), the insensitive (*anaisthêtos*), and the opsimath (*opsimathês*). Chattering, gossip and lying mark the behaviour of five other characters: the querulous (*mempsimoiros*), the prattler (*adoleschos*), the loquacious (*lalos*), the backbiter (*kakologos*), and the fabricator (*logopoios*). The behaviour of three characters comes under cowardice and suspicion: the pessimist (*deisidaimôn*), the skeptical (*apistos*), and the coward (*deilos*). There are two characters whose behaviour is characterized by aberrance and domineeringness: the authoritarian (*oligarchikos*) and the accomplice, or the person who is associated with wicked people (*philoponêros*).