
Theophrastus and His World by Paul Millett

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The relative thinness of this book is deceptive, as the amount of information it offers is enormous. The 117 pages of main text are supplemented by 41 small-print pages of endnotes, altogether 314 of them, offering innumerable details from textual remarks to bibliographical data and, of course, various suggestions and interpretations. This makes the reading of the whole ‘essay’ (as the author himself repeatedly calls his book) quite an enterprise even for someone who is fairly well acquainted with scholarship on Theophrastus.

From the title of the book, readers might expect a broad study on Theophrastus and his scholarly contribution, including the field for which he is most famous, viz. botany. Thus, for those interested in the history of natural sciences, it could be disappointing to find out that the book is rather a full-length treatment of Theophrastus’ *Characters*, which, as the sleeve-note mentions, ‘aims to locate this influential work with respect to the political and philosophical worlds of Athens in the late fourth century’. It does contain a few references to Theophrastus’ other scientific work but the focus is clearly on the *Characters*.² At that, Millett’s study is a must for everyone dealing

¹ The reviewer apologizes for the lateness of this review.

² Thus, in his review, John Scarborough [2009] suggests that the book is mis-titled: ‘More indicative of Millett’s assured readings of the *Characters* might be “Theophrastus’ *Characters*. Reflections on Habits and Personalities in Fourth-Century Athens”.’ It will be seen, however, that the book is about much more than fourth-century Athens. An alternate title would rather have been ‘Theophrastus and Our World’.

with the topic and certainly one of the most important books ever published on the *Characters*.

In a way, it can be seen as a supplement to the massive edition with commentary of the *Characters* by Millett's Cambridge colleague, James Diggle [2004]. Millett touches upon almost every aspect of the *Characters*, including chapters on the reception of Theophrastus in the widest possible sense.

The book is divided into 12 chapters each focusing on different aspects of the *Characters* and the wider context of the work. Chapter 1 ('The *Kairos* of the *Characters*?') is an introduction to the study and contains a useful synopsis of what follows. As Millett himself notes [2], his preoccupation with the *Characters* goes back to his earlier work *Lending and Borrowing in Ancient Athens* [1991]. Indeed, many important points on the *Characters*, especially those dealing with credit relations between Athenian citizens, have been taken over from that book. *Theophrastus and His World* contains, however, a more systematic exploration of the historical possibilities of the *Characters*. Millett rightly emphasizes the need to contextualize the *Characters*, not just by literary genre, although this is important, but by reading the *Characters* against the background of Theophrastus' other surviving works and fragments. We still lack a full-range treatment of the whole 'world of Theophrastus' as it emerges from the latter. Thanks to Project Theophrastus, initiated in 1979 by William W. Fortenbaugh, we now have at least a modern edition of Theophrastus' fragments and *testimonia* [1993] with commentary volumes on various topics appearing since 1995.³ Millett uses this corpus throughout the book, although he is well aware of the limitations in drawing conclusions on the basis of such scanty evidence. In addition, any work on the *Characters* is made more difficult by the textual corruption in the piece itself. As Millett notes [3], '[v]irtually everything about the text as transmitted is problematic'.⁴

³ In addition, members of the Project have published minor works of Theophrastus in separate editions as well as the fragments of other members of Aristotle's school. To the list given on page 119, add Fortenbaugh and White 2006. The remarks on Ariston [12, 123n4] would have profited from the discussion in this volume.

⁴ One should note, however, that it is not correct to say with Millett [3] that the definitions have been identified as Byzantine additions.

In chapter 2 ('Theophrastus of Eresus and Theophrastus Such'), Millett turns to various later imitations of Theophrastus' *Characters*, focusing, as the title suggests, on George Eliot's *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (first published in 1879). This work, Millett argues, may provide clues to reading the Theophrastean original. He notes several half-hidden allusions to Theophrastus, demonstrating how Eliot exposes her scholarly familiarity with the original Theophrastus. But what can Eliot's text tell us about the *Characters* of Theophrastus? Millett argues [5] that one of the issues emerging from her reworking is the implicit ideology shared by Theophrastus and his original intended audience. Thus, as Eliot's reworking is based on the idea of an imagined audience or readership, 'a group which has its identity defined and solidarity strengthened by informed engagement with the text', so too the absence of any moralizing guidance in the *Characters* may be explained by an understanding common to Theophrastus and his intended audience [19]. Important here is Millett's disagreement with Diggle's view [2004, 12] that 'the work lacks all ethical dimensions'. As Millett emphasizes [127n69], the ethical elements are 'implicit in the understanding common to author and original audience'.

The next chapter ('Theophrastus the Metic') focuses on Theophrastus' headship of the Lyceum in Athens, where he was a metic. Millett first tries to reconstruct the setting of the Lyceum in later fourth-century Athens, relying on one of the most important texts that we have on this topic, viz. Theophrastus' will preserved by Diogenes Laertius [*Vitae* 5.53–54]. He emphasizes [20–21] Theophrastus' concern with securing personal bonds between his followers, which aims at securing the future well-being of the school. This includes references to some of the key terms, such as *κοινωνία*, *φίλοι* and *οἰκεῖοι*. The sense of community may, as Millett shows [21 ff.], be reinforced by the location and configuration of the Lyceum itself, since more recent excavations would seem to put the Lyceum rather more remotely from the city centre of Athens than believed so far. Millett concludes that the 'metic' character of the Lyceum, somewhat 'disassociated from the civic mainstream' may support the idea of a 'heightened sense of community'. The cooperative ideal of the Lyceum is also evident in Theophrastus' will, the phrasing of which reflects the strengthening of communal institutions [27].

Chapter 4 ('That's Entertainment?') is important in that it deals with an old controversy over whether the *Characters* should be regarded as entertainment or not. The work is indeed very difficult to position and it has, over time, been connected with various areas of study, e.g., ethics, comedy, and rhetoric. As noted above, Millett does not agree with Diggle's claim that 'the work lacks all ethical dimensions' and, in my opinion, rightly so. As in the previous chapter, Millett here too [31] emphasizes the implicit ethical elements: 'Shared experience and expectations provided an implicit moral commentary on the *Characters*, which later generations have found it necessary to supply for themselves.' He tries to supply occasions for the *Characters* that combine its veiled ethical content with obvious entertainment value. This is done by connecting the humorous effect of the sketches to the shared values of their audience (whether in lectures or during more informal gatherings), which Millett envisages as a community of wealthy scholars (or would-be scholars) confirming and reinforcing their sense of solidarity. The humor of the *Characters* is further associated with caricature. This is important to keep in mind for the historians who engage with the text, as the essence of caricature is exaggeration, which makes the use of the *Characters* as a historical source a very tricky business.

Some of these issues are further explored in chapter 5 ('They Do Things Differently There?'). Here, Millett focuses on possible 'Rules of Evidence' relevant to the *Characters* and relations between the context of the work and historical events or social practices. To begin, he touches upon the issue of similarity and difference between ancient (specifically Theophrastean) and contemporary character. He notes [43] that overemphasis on familiarity of the types (which typically focuses on specific actions performed by them) 'may hinder appreciation of what is arguably different and distinctive'. The first problem that we run into is the meaning of the titles of the sketches, be they abstract terms or agent nouns. Usually, it is assumed that there is some enduring, core meaning in each of these 30 words but attempts to find this are bound to fail. Millett himself seems to favor the 'polythetic classification' suggested by Rodney Needham, according to which such characteristics are to be considered as collections of overlapping attributes (Wittgenstein's 'family resemblances' or *Familienähnlichkeiten*) with no single attribute necessarily common to every usage [see [Needham1975](#)]. Another argument against

the straightforward universality of all 30 character-traits is the range of various terms used in translating them. (In appendix 1, ‘Naming the *Characters*’ [159–164], Millett presents a selection of renderings of the titles of Theophrastus’ sketches in 10 editions and translations, including, in addition to English ones, two French translations.⁵) In addition to the timeless reading of the *Characters*, there is the time-specific approach which tries to relate the content of the *Characters* to events in Athens. Here, too, alternative readings are possible, not least because of uncertain time of composition of the *Characters*. An important aspect is the perseverance of democratic ideas and ideals in Hellenistic times, especially in New Comedy, ‘[t]he remarkable stability of Athens’s democratic ethos’ as argued by Susan Lape [2004, 60]. This thesis, Millett argues [46], helps ‘to explain the inclusion in the *Characters* of democratic institutions as essential parts of Theophrastus’ frame of reference’ and ‘reinforces the idea of Theophrastus as concerned with exploring appropriate behaviour in a polis that was still essentially egalitarian in outlook’.⁶ Millett also notes [46] that all too frequently the *Characters* are treated ‘as footnote-fodder for studies of “everyday life” in Athens, supplying more-or-less colourful snippets of information’. Rather, the *Characters* promote ‘different readings (in some cases radically different) of Athenian religion, politics, economy and society, and warfare’ [48]. The chapter ends with a more detailed discussion on interpreting the figure of the ἄγροικος (‘the rustic’, but also ‘the boor’, or ‘Country Bumpkin’ as Millett translates it in the *Characters*).

In chapter 6 (‘Corruption and the *Characters*’), Millett rightly emphasizes, as others have done before, the notion of norm-reversal as a central aspect of the *Characters*. This consists in reinforcing general principles of conduct by stating instances of the opposite. From these sequences of transgressed norms, the norms themselves

⁵ The addition of the French titles (‘out of historical interest’ [3]) is somewhat odd, though—why not add other languages or limit the selection to English renderings? (There may be historical reasons for including La Bruyère, but Navarre?) I fully agree with Millett, however, when he writes ([3] that ‘[t]hese changing perceptions and representations of moral values constitute in themselves a fragment of modern cultural history.’ Indeed the translation history of the *Characters* deserves a study in its own right.

⁶ Millett refers to the important article by Hartmut Leppin [2002], who also argues for a persistent democratic mentality in early Hellenistic Athens.

may be reconstructed [52]. In the case of Theophrastus, Millett argues, this transgression occurs with respect to various occasions and institutions relevant to living in Athens ‘as an upper-class member of the citizen-élite,’ and the norms are ‘standards of behaviour aspired to by Theophrastus and his philosophically inclined audience’. Thus, he concludes, the *Characters* looks like

an implied code of behaviour written (unlike oratory and drama) for an élite audience, engaging with the practicalities of their lives within the polis. The implied end-product of this process of norm-reversal might resemble the Peripatetic ideal of a citizen, tempered to suit the circumstances of a democratically-minded polis. We could label him ‘Theophrastus’ Man’. [52]

For the historian, Millett suggests, this can be a frame for analyzing material in the *Characters*. In what follows, Millett turns to a book by P. Horden and N. Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea* [2000] to assess two of its key hypotheses in conjunction with Theophrastus and his *Characters*. These are the fragmentation of the Mediterranean world into connected micro-regions or micro-ecologies, and the ubiquity of honor and shame as underlying and distinctive Mediterranean values.

Chapter 6 is also one of the places where Millett passingly mentions Theophrastus’ scientific writings, especially those on plants. He emphasizes the geographical scope of Theophrastus’ work,⁷ which includes relevant information coming all the way from Middle East and, at the other extreme, evidence from various parts of the city of Athens or even a single plane-tree near the Lyceum. Millett notes that Theophrastus in his early career could be seen as a paradigm for personal mobility, and the *Characters* is the only work to survive by Theophrastus with an obviously Athenian focus [53–54]. He argues, however [54–55], that there is a strong pattern of connectivity in the work’s ‘interplay of city and country within the Athenian polis, intrusion of the wider world into the city of Athens, and outreach of Athenian interests and involvement’. This connectivity furthers the sense of civic identity but also has ‘a strong ethical dimension’ [57].

⁷ An important study on this (‘The World of Theophrastus’) was published in 1994 by P. M. Fraser and, as Millett acknowledges [119n8], it overlaps with ‘a small though crucial corner’ of his own conception of Theophrastus’ world as described in ch. 6.

Chapter 7 ('Honour Bright') is concerned with the regulation of honor and shame, first of all as exemplified/anticipated by the sketch of the slanderer [*Char.* 28]. Millett introduces the ongoing debate on 'honour and shame', leading the reader through relevant discussion in Horden and Purcell [n10], Bernard Williams' *Shame and Necessity* [1993] and other studies on the topic. While Horden and Purcell tentatively extend a countryman's sense of shame and excellence to the less well-off citizen of a Greek city-state in the age of Aristotle, the *Characters*, Millett notes, 'complement this picture, offering a glimpse of the value-system appropriate to a better-off, though not narrowly aristocratic group of imagined citizens' [60]. Millett also presents a synopsis of an anthropological treatment that is chosen as a point of departure by Horden and Purcell for their analysis of honor and shame in the Mediterranean, viz. J. K. Campbell's classic study *Honour, Family and Patronage* [1964], which is based on fieldwork among a Greek shepherd community (the Sarakatsani) in the mid 1950s. Millett selectively re-presents themes from this book and notes that these worlds show clear signs of convergence with regards to honor and shame.

In the following chapters, Millett explores ways in which honor and shame are expressed and manipulated in the *Characters*, constructing systems of etiquette appropriate for the home, the streets, and other public places where individuals were on display. In chapter 8 ('Etiquette for an Élite: At Home'), Millett emphasizes, among other things, that the overall impression that we get from the *Characters* is of Athens 'as a collection of highly public places, where individuals were perpetually on display and open to assessment' [71]. This he connects with the idea (originally developed by Jacob Burckhardt) of the *agonal* or competitive ethos, which is seen as central to the Athenian civic experience. Following Simon Goldhill's discussion in his 'Programme Notes'—not 'Performance Notes'!—which introduce the essays in *Performance Culture and Athenian Democracy* [1999], Millett briefly analyzes, in the context of the *Characters*, four Greek terms that are considered to underpin the notion of performance in the context of Athens' democratic culture: ἀγών (contest), ἐπίδειξις (display), σχῆμα (appearance), and θεωρία (spectating) [72 f.]. Θεωρία, he notes (following Goldhill 1999, 73),

can also encompass the philosopher's contemplative view of the world, which is arguably the gaze appropriate to the author and intended audience of the *Characters*.

In connexion with this, Millett once again presents his view of the *Characters*' original purpose. He writes:

Theophrastus invites his pupils, who constitute a group theoretically beyond citizenship, to contemplate the behaviour of a group of citizens engaged with Athens' resiliently democratic ideology, evaluating their behaviour in terms of shared Peripatetic outlook and also the imagined response of the *Characters*' fellow citizens. [73]

In what follows, Millett uses location as the principle to order the shame-incurring performances by the characters. He discusses both the etiquette of master-slave relations and relations between free members of the household, including women.

Chapter 9 ('Etiquette for an Élite: Away') continues the discussion started in the previous chapter. Millett notes [83] that in public places of Athens there was a uniform code of behavior which applied to wealthier citizens, viz. 'judging and being judged'. He describes this preoccupation with appearance by the example of several characters (this includes, e.g., the using of clothes and shoes as 'accessories to character', the etiquette of closely encountering people and conversation in general, the latter being an especially important aspect of the *Characters*). Based on Peter Burke's conversational characteristics [1993], Millett analyses the way in which various characters destroy the conversational intimacy, ignore the principle of conversational cooperation, over-exploit conversation as a competitive encounter, or disrupt the equality in speaker-rights [85 ff.]. He emphasizes that the city with its built environment offered a lot of opportunities for enhancing or diminishing honor. These include public buildings and spaces but also non-civic architecture, which all allowed for ἐπίδειξις—barber shops, public baths, θαύματα or street entertainments, gymnasia, theatre, various religious ceremonies, the Assembly, and law courts.

Chapter 10 ('Face to Face in the Agora') is specifically dedicated to the Agora as a scene which exemplifies the complex of interpersonal relations in Theophrastus' Athens, involving citizens and others. The Agora was 'a zone of intense and visible interaction' [93], which

was often but not exclusively focused on buying and selling. This interaction, Millett argues, ‘involving the detailed etiquette of exchange, has ramifications for the wider relations between citizens and friends’ [94]. It often well demonstrates interplay of status, exchange, reciprocity, and personal relations. Millett concludes that ‘[t]he Characters repeatedly shame themselves and incidentally threaten the community of relations by undermining the ideology of reciprocity on which personal relationships depended’ [95]. This is highlighted in the institution of *eranos* loans, which were interest-free contributions collected from friends in time of need.⁸

In chapter 11, ‘Conspicuous Co-operation?’, Millett measures the attitude of the Theophrastean types towards work and leisure against Thorstein Veblen’s book *The Theory of the Leisure Class* [1899]. He focuses on the unnamed character sketch which is traditionally part of the description of the obsequious man [*Char.* 5.6–10] and which Millett calls ‘Conspicuous Consumption’. Briefly, Veblen in his book opposes the productive and useful society with the ostentatious and honorific. Taking this into account, Millett notes that conspicuous consumption can be seen as ‘high-profile waste of valuable resources in the competition for respectability’ [100], which is marked out by its ‘blending of economically unnecessary expenditure with maximum publicity’ [101]. Millett argues that the divergence of views held by Veblen and Theophrastus proves ultimately more illuminating than the similarities. According to Veblen, he notes, ‘the fault was embedded in society, an innate feature of the class of consumers’ [101–102]. For Theophrastus, however, ‘inappropriate consumption arose out of individual moral failure, the result of avoidable deviation from the mean, bringing shame on the person concerned’ [102]. It is also worth mentioning that there was nothing reprehensible about leisure in itself so far as this was ‘legitimate leisure’, which included the possession of slaves and (presumably) the economic exploitation of slave labor. Millett further discusses the divergence between Veblen’s negative observations on domestic servants and the presentation of slaves in the *Characters*. An interesting part in Veblen’s discussion is devoted to classical learning as

⁸ For *eranos* loans, see [Millett 1991](#), 153–159.

a distinct form of conspicuous consumption [103].⁹ An analogy in antiquity that Millett points out is ‘the leisured discipline of learning philosophy’ [104]. At this point, Millett establishes limits to the analysis presented so far, emphasizing that we would need a lot more textual material to recreate the ‘realities’ of interpersonal relations in the fourth-century Athens, and that the picture that we get from the *Characters* is ‘necessarily restricted but significant in its specificity’ [105]. The implied code of conduct exemplified through the ‘notional model’ of ‘Theophrastus’ Man’ is highlighted once again [cf. 52]. Millett further compares this model with the Peripatetic ideal as arguably exemplified by Aristotle’s *μεγαλόφυχος* or ‘Great-Hearted Man’ [105]. Here, he adopts Michael Pakaluk’s interpretation [2004] of Aristotle’s *μεγαλόφυχος*, providing support for his sceptical views by analyzing the differences between the *μεγαλόφυχος* and a typical Theophrastean character. He suggests that

[w]hat emerges from *Characters*’ actions is not how to be a good man; nor even necessarily how to be a good citizen. Rather the message is how to be good at being a citizen in the context of a democratic polis. [109]

The final chapter (‘Theophrastus Nonesuch’) re-states the ideas developed in the book. Millett recalls that although opinions about the *Characters* have, for the most part, been favorable, there have been dissenting voices that criticize the work for its lack of originality or of psychological subtletness. As he rightly observes, this kind of assessment shows ‘how, in the absence of any explicit guidance from its author, readers of the *Characters* need to construct their own frame of reference’ [111]. Indeed, he admits that most of his book has been concerned with trying to offer an alternate range of contexts and settings within which the *Characters* might be read, moving beyond the usual literary or philosophical backgrounds [112]. In this, the first key notion is ‘performance culture’, which the author has extended to the actions of the types depicted in the *Characters*. The second emphasis is on the whole corpus of writings by Theophrastus, which means more extensive use of the fragmentary evidence now made easily accessible through the publications of Project Theophrastus.

⁹ See 154n281 for an interesting excursus into Veblen’s own educational background and his relation to classical studies.

Other Greek texts (Aristotle, Menander) have been used for contextualizing the *Characters*; and a selection of non-classical texts have been read against the *Characters*, helping to establish its distinctive qualities and providing frameworks for assessing various aspects of the world of Theophrastus. In the final chapter, Millett also evokes another modern study, viz. [Elias 2000](#) on the sociological significance of etiquette. He notes [114] that aspects of Elias' method correspond to his own concern with the *Characters*, giving as an example Elias' 'close reading of "manner books" to demonstrate the process whereby actions, apparently trivial in themselves, may acquire far broader social significance' [114].

Millett closes the final chapter with some speculations on the ongoing appeal of the *Characters*, a work that 'has over recent centuries moulded perceptions of Athenian culture both classical and early Hellenistic' [115]. He argues that

the text might be read as a practical commentary on living, according to Peripatetic principles, in a democratically oriented polis, with behaviour calculated to reinforce its positive values. [116]

However, 'the direct and near-universal appeal of the *Characters* (not just to historians) remains largely unexplained' [116]. Indeed.

In addition to appendix 1 on naming the characters (see above), there are two more appendices. Appendix 2 presents a three-piece set of Theophrastean imitations from an issue of the *Punch* magazine from the year 1901 ('The New Publisher', 'The New Journalist' and 'The New War Correspondent'), while appendix 3 briefly studies classical allusion in Thackeray's *Book of Snobs*.

The world of the *Characters* could be widened almost endlessly and it is quite understandable that at some point the study has to come to an end. Millett tries to present us with almost every detail and aspect of Theophrastus' life and work, at least as regards the *Characters*. This means that relevant information can pop up everywhere in the book, main text or notes, sometimes distracting the line of thought. One can see a wish to incorporate every piece of information to a place most suitable for it, but sometimes one longs for more space.

Typographically the book would certainly have profited from slightly bigger print and larger margins. The endnotes, at least, are

numbered consecutively, which makes it easier for the reader to consult them. Unfortunately, there is only one index, which contains references to texts by and about Theophrastus. Certainly, a general index would have been helpful in guiding the casual browser through the wealth of information in the book.

A book so detailed is bound to contain some misprints but these are not many. I note, e.g., a few mistakes in the publication titles, especially the German ones:

- 172 Bolkestein 1929: 'religionsgeschichtliche' for 'religionsgeschichtliche'
- 174 Fortenbaugh 1975: 'Verhaltensregelmässigkeit' for 'Verhaltensregelmässigkeiten'
- 174 Fortenbaugh 1998: 'Philosophischer texte' for 'philosophischer Texte'
- 177 Leppin 2002: 'Burgermentalität' and 'Übergang' for 'Bürgermentalität' and 'Übergang'
- 180 Ribbeck 1882: 'Betrag' for 'Beitrag'.

As has been said above, the book is a must for everyone dealing with the *Characters* of Theophrastus; but it is also important as an example of analytical reception history. Millett does not give any reasons for his selection of texts: indeed he notes on page 117, that '[t]here is nothing in the least authoritative about the choice of modern texts against which I have tried to read the *Characters*.' However, the wealth of information that one gets from reading the *Characters* against these modern texts, but even more so the amount of further important questions that arise from this process of contextualizing, is what makes Millett's study especially relevant to social historian and the lover of character writing alike.

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