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Theophrastus (371-287 B.C.)

Theophrastus was born on the island of Lesbos—the home of Sappho—where he studied philosophy. From there he went to study philosophy in Athens, becoming a pupil of Plato, at the Academy, and then of Aristotle, at the Lyceum. With Aristotle Theophrastus formed a close personal connection; the two men traveled to the north of Greece, when Aristotle, the teacher of Alexander, went into exile to escape the anti-Macedonian mood in Athens. Upon Aristotle's death, Theophrastus was made director of the Lyceum—he also became the guardian of Aristotle's children---and at the Lyceum he became immensely popular, at one time supervising two thousand disciples, among whom was the playwright Menander.

The work of Theophrastus, as Lyceum Director, was astonishingly diverse, as was that of Aristotle. Theophrastus has been called the 'father of Botany,' for his extensive treatise on *The Causes of Plants*; he also wrote investigative treatises on a wide variety of topics--logic, metaphysics, physics--displaying the same kind of empirical fervor that drove Aristotle. (At his death at eighty-five Theophrastus complained that life was just beginning, and now he had to die.) Within this busy work setting we come upon the text for which Theophrastus is best known today, his *Characters*. This work consists of thirty sharp-edged portraits of distorted social types: the coward, the flatterer, the over-zealous, the tactless, the slanderer, the newsmonger, the surly…and on and on through the roster of the socially comic. The perspective is similar to that of the comedy of manners perspective In the English novel—Thackeray or Charles Dickens—and springs from a sharp eye for foibles combined, to some extent, with a dour world view. The deeper explanations of this treatise lie in Aristotle's own work; in his *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle stresses the importance of normative behavior. For example, he thinks it proper to walk at a moderate pace, not exaggeratedly fast or slow. The example is simplistic. But in Aristotle the example is expanded into an entire ethic of proper, moderate behavior. That is where Theophrastus is coming from.