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NATURE AND FUNCTION OF THEOPHRASTUS'  
*CHARACTERS*: RESPONSE TO ATHINA DIMOPOULOU

There are several reasons for thanking Athina Dimopoulou for her paper on Theophrastus' *Characters*. During the long life of our Symposia (more than 30 years) nobody had ever thought about the possible relevance of this work for the study of Greek law. And yet as Cicero writes and Athina reminds us, Theophrastus was an expert in Greek and barbaric laws, he wrote a book *Peri nomon* as well as close to forty other legal works, and his legal knowledge was well known by the Roman jurists, who included excerpts of his work in Justinian's *Digest*. However, because of the unfortunate loss of those works (except for a few fragments), his legal expertise was inevitably underestimated, if not completely forgotten. Athina's paper first merit, then, is to compel us to reconsider the *Characters* as a source that may both integrate the reference to some legal institutions and design a picture of the moral and social norms inspiring the behavior of his thirty *Characters*. As a whole the latter represented the opposite of the values and the behaviors that good citizens were supposed to adopt. But before discussing the various different characters the paper makes some general introductory statements, which deserve some consideration.

The first concerns Theophrastus' relation with Athens. Albeit a foreigner coming from Lesbos, he was so integrated in Athenian culture that, as generally assumed, his *Characters* represent a number of Athenian (rather than Lesbian) citizens. However, there is some controversy concerning the historical moment in which those Athenians were imagined to live. According to some the values inspiring their behavior would represent the new trend of the end of the fourth century BCE (when the *Characters* were written), a period in which the Athenian citizens would have been more interested in their own personal affairs than in public ones. According to others, by contrast, the values of that period were not very different from those of the previous century, and the paper endorses this hypothesis, as well as I do, even if I think that this is a problem that should deserve a deeper and more extensive discussion.

The second and fundamental problem concerns the interpretation of the nature and function of the Characters. Among the most important ones we may recall that:

- a) the Characters were aimed to complement the teaching of the Aristotelian moral;
- b) they were a literary work written with humoristic intention;
- c) they were an appendix to a treatise of political theory;
- d) they were a rhetorical work for training students in rhetorical schools.

As in recent years this latter theory has been reconsidered and in my opinion rightly reassessed, I think it deserves to be very briefly recalled. In a famous article published in 1898, Otto Immisch wrote that the Characters cannot be interpreted in the light of a supposed relationship with the Aristotelian ethical works, namely the *Nicomachean Ethics*. They must be rather interpreted in connection with the second book of the *Rhetoric*, where Aristotle analyzes the character and the emotions that help the orator convince his public of his reasons. As Immisch observes, Aristotle's ethical works are concerned with ethical concepts in general and not with the real people who embody them. The mimetic description of Theophrastus' Characters instead is uniquely interested in the representation of human types, described in an artistic (humoristic) way with details that help to define them. Finally, none of the different characters portrays a real vice: from the moral point of view their behavior is rather totally irrelevant.

Even if of course this is not the place to enter such a problem, I feel that further reflection on the rhetorical theory might be one of the most effective instruments to clarify, if certainly not to solve, the many problems raised by the Characters: always keeping in mind, however, I. Volt's recent research and his caveat that none of the various interpretations advanced until today may be accepted in full, nor in full excluded. Each of them might contain part of the truth that could help to integrate one of the others (namely, as I said, the rhetorical road of enquiry). And if I am not mistaken this is in part the opinion shared by the paper's author, when in the Conclusions she highlights the parallels between the Characters and the *loidoria*, "the character assassination followed by litigants before the Athenian courts, in which an orator would undermine his opponent's ethos in order to enhance his credibility", and when she recalls the many scholars who "argued that Theophrastus' treatise was written as a handbook providing the orator with readymade character depictions, introducing a method of typesetting adopted by rhetorical schools".

Finally, going back to Theophrastus' legal expertise, I want to recall a couple of example showing the interest of the specific reference to legal institutions:

- a) the answer of The Gambler (Theophr. Char. 17) to the announcement that his wife has delivered a son (the answer is "and half of my patrimony has gone") is one of the many pieces of evidence of the economic problems connected with the *paidotrophia* and a confirmation of the perennial economical conflict between fathers and adult sons;

b) the caricature of the litigant loaded with documents rightly quoted in the paragraph of the paper dedicated to the “Court etiquette” is an interesting contribution to the problem concerning the importance of written testimonies, which has been largely debated, among the others, by a number of the participants in this Symposium. And many other examples could be given, all susceptible to other reflections on important controversial legal questions.

To conclude I want to congratulate Athina for her choice of topic and for her many important remarks to our discussion.

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