Moral instruction by bad example: The first Latin translations of Theophrastus’ Characters

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The search for Truth necessarily takes the form of a depiction of error.
Vincent Descombes, Proust: Philosophy of the Novel, 4

1. INTRODUCTION

Theophrastus’ Characters, a series of 30 short sketches of vice written around 319 BC is, as Jeffrey Rusten puts it: ‘a pleasant little book for the casual reader, but an enormously difficult one for the scholar’. Its pleasantness lies in how it chooses to depict vices as ordinary as ‘bad timing’, ‘idle chatter’, and ‘superstition’, by providing a brief example of the daily habits of a man who embodies the quality in question. ‘The man with bad timing’ for example, is ‘the sort who goes up to someone who is busy and asks his advice. He sings love songs to his girlfriend when she has a fever. (…) If he’s a guest at a wedding, he launches into a tirade against women’. Its difficulty, on the other hand, lies in part in what Robin Lane Fox calls the ‘misreadings’ of its reception-history: in how it has not always been read as a pleasant book for entertainment, but for a range of other purposes instead. One of these ‘misreadings’ was the notion that the Characters offered a kind of moral instruction, an understanding inspired by a moralizing Proem that was appended to the sketches.
in the late Roman empire, or early Byzantine period, promising a comparison between vice and virtue, absent in Theophrastus’ own text. As the medieval manuscript tradition preserved this spurious Proem, this was how a series of Latin editors approached Theophrastus’ work, a reading instrumental in explaining why, across sixteenth-century Europe, it became so extraordinarily popular to edit or translate. ‘The printing presses’, so declares the preface to the sixteenth edition of the *Characters* that had been published that century, ‘became feverishly interested in this little work by Theophrastus’, designed as it was ‘for the correction of bad behaviour’ and ‘the removal of malice’.6

These early editors had a difficult task on their hands: how to make sense of the Proem’s moralizing claims, given that the *Characters* only contained a set of vices without corresponding virtues? And how to give these ordinary vices, each outlined in what seem like figures from observational comedy, the solemn dignity the Proem conferred on them? Turning to the prefaces, dedication letters and other paratexts of the editions of the *Characters* published in the sixteenth century, we find a number of surprising solutions to these problems. When taken together, they present us with three arguments for why bad examples might be instrumental in the instruction of good behaviour: an interpretive tradition that begins in 1517 and that ends with Isaac Casaubon’s celebrated editions of 1592 and 1599. The first argument is made by Lapo da Castiglionchio the Younger, for whom the *Characters* shows us how to discern other people’s natures, in order to better manipulate them. Willibald Pirckheimer makes the second, positioning the *Characters* as a novel means of social control and a vehicle for corrective self-reflection. The third is elaborated by both Leonhard Lycius and Frédéric Morel, who frame Theophrastus’ text as a pedagogical device used to prevent children adopting bad habits.

This tradition has not before been studied in detail, with both literary historians and classicists preferring to focus on Casaubon’s later editions, rather

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5 For the date of the Proem, and the papyrus and manuscript transmission see James Diggle (ed.), *Theophrastus: Characters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 161, 37–51.

6 ‘Inde praela fervêre coeperunt ab opusculo quod Theophrastus Eresius, cùm ad incultos et malè dolatos mores instituendos, averruncandam è mentibus amentiam’, Pierre Matthieu, ‘Praefatio ad Lectorem’, in Isaac Casaubon, *Theophrasti notationes morum […]* (Lyons, 1599), ā7v–8Tr. The fifteen printed editions that preceded this are: Johannes Gremper, *De characteribus, sive notis […]* (Vienna, 1517); Willibald Pirckheimer, *Theophrastou characteres* [Greek] […] (Nuremberg, 1527); *Theophrastou characteres* [Greek]. *Cum interpretatione latina* (Basel, 1531); *Theophrasti […] Opera* (Basel, 1541); Conrad Gessner, *Ioannis Stobaei sententiae […]*, 2nd ed. (Basel, 1549); Giambattista da Camozzi, *Theophrasti historiam de plantis […] et quodam alios ipsius libros […]* (Venice, 1552); Aristotelis et Theophrasti *scripta guedam* (Paris, 1557); Conrad Gessner, *Ioannis Stobaei sententiae […]*, 3rd ed. (Zurich, 1559); Leonhard Lycius, *Libellus Theophrasti continens notae atque descriptions morum* (Leipzig, 1561); Conrad Gessner, *Loci communes sacri et profani […]per Ioannem Stobarum et veteres in Graecia monachos Antonium & Maximum […]* (Frankfurt, 1581); Claude Auberi, *Theophrasti item Eresii morum characteres*, in Denis Lambin, *Aristotelis Ethicorum Nicomachiorum […]* (Basel, 1582); Frédéric Morel, *Theophrasti de notis morum […]* (Paris, 1583); FriedrichSyllburg, *Aristotelis Ethicorum […] Theophrasti characteres ethici […]* (Frankfurt, 1584); *Thesaurus philosophiae moralis, quo continentur […] Theophrasti characteres […]* (Geneva, 1589); Isaac Casaubon, *Theophrasti characteres ethici […]* (Lyons, 1592).
The Proem introduces the *Characters* as providing the answer to a problem. It opens with Theophrastus telling his interlocutor Polycles that he has long wondered why ‘even though Greece lies under the same sky, and all Greeks are educated in the same way, it happens that we do not have the same composition of character’. After long observation, the answer that Theophrastus has found to this question, it continues, is that there are men who are ‘good and bad’, two ‘classes of character’ that separate and distinguish individuals who share the same education and climate. Having come to this conclusion, Theophrastus states that he feels he ‘ought to write’ about how these two categories of men ‘normally behave in their lives’.

The Proem’s explanation of the *Characters*’ ambition does not however end on this note. Rather it proposes that these sketches have a further moralizing purpose: that they will make Theophrastus and Polycles’ sons ‘better’. Theophrastus outlines two ways in which this will work. Their sons should first use this text, as ‘a guide’ to navigate which kind of people they should solicit and which they should avoid, so that they can learn ‘to associate with and
become close to the finest men’. 13 By mixing with these people, their sons will secondly develop an understanding of how ‘not to fall short’ of their standards: they will learn from others how to be excellent themselves. 14 With this, the Proem introduces a morally instructive as well as an empirically clarifying purpose: Theophrastus will not only reveal the two distinct classes of men he has observed but will do so in order to teach readers how to better navigate the social world, and in doing so, how to give themselves a chance to become good. Both of these announced purposes, however, rely on the text of the Characters containing its missing virtues. This leaves the reader with the problem of trying to make sense both of how people can be separated into two classes of character, when only one class is depicted; and of how to use this text to learn to associate with ‘the finest men’ from portraits of their opposites.

This disjunction between text and paratext did not, however, deter the Latin translators from attempting to show how the Characters could in some way fulfil the Proem’s moral pledge. If the Proem ignited its readers to approach the Characters with these particular moralizing intentions in mind – to encourage them to mine portraits of men with bad timing for signs of instruction and revelation – several other factors helped fan the flames. These readers were aware that Theophrastus was Aristotle’s successor at the Lyceum – ‘prince after Aristotle of the Peripatetics’ as one title proudly claims – and, in several cases, that he was an important botanist, metaphysician and philosopher of the senses in his own right. 15 They were often further familiar with the study of character as a crucial part of ancient philosophy, with Aristotle’s Ethics having made its way into Latin translation long before. 16 Armed with these elements of context, these Latin editors and translators retained additional grounds on which to base a reading of the Characters as providing moral guidance, despite the striking absence of the promised virtues. This did mean, however, that they needed to justify how exactly these bad examples might serve the end of helping to transform a reader’s actions for the better, and it is as a result of this obligation that we find our aesthetic.

3. LAPO DA CASTIGLIONCHIO AND THE EDITIO PRINCEPS

The first Latin translator to rise to this challenge was the fifteenth-century humanist, Lapo da Castiglionchio the Younger, whose c.1434/5 manuscript translation of the Characters was printed in Vienna in July 1517, edited by the

13 ‘καταλειφθέντων αὐτῶν ὑπομνημάτων τοιούτων, αἷς παραδείγματι χρώμενοι αἱρέσονται τοῖς εὐσχημονεστάτοις συνεισε τε καὶ ὀμιλεῖν’ (Char. 0.3).
14 ‘ὅπως μὴ καταδεστέροι ὁδιών αὐτῶν’ (Char. 0.5). I thank René de Nicolay for his reading of this line.
humanist Johannes Gremper.\textsuperscript{17} This Vienna edition is the text's \textit{editio princeps} – whether we argue it in terms of primacy or influence\textsuperscript{18} – not Willibald Pirckheimer's 1527 edition, as has often been claimed.\textsuperscript{19} Lapo's translation of 15 sketches is prefaced by a detailed dedication letter in which we find the first argument for how these examples of vice were thought to hold the potential to change their reader's behaviour.

Lapo's dedication seems to be addressed to Francesco dal Legname, a fifteenth-century Papal chamberlain.\textsuperscript{20} In it Lapo sets up the \textit{Characters} as having a number of fundamental qualities. He declares it to be a text which collects only 'vices', he associates it with moral philosophy through a methodological connection with Aristotle, and he indicates that it is a work from which 'much utility' can be derived.\textsuperscript{21} Its utility lies in how it exposes 'certain images and characteristics' through which its reader can learn to 'judge' others, understand their natures and thus 'master them with intelligence and wisdom'. Lapo clarifies that this will have particular interest for those who, in his elusive phrase, are 'in charge of very various cases', those who, presumably like dal Legname, encounter people of all different types, whose qualities they are entrusted to discern. The \textit{Characters}, Lapo hopes, is then a text that will not only help its readers to recognize the vices of others, but on the basis of this recognition, learn how to better engage with them.

In this way, Lapo's reading extends an aspect of the moralizing purpose of the \textit{Characters} that we found in the Proem, where the \textit{Characters} serves as a guide to the social world.\textsuperscript{22} Rather than suggesting that by using this guide,

\textsuperscript{17} For this manuscript date, see: Charles B. Schmitt, 'Theophrastus', in Paul Oskar Kristeller (ed.), \textit{Catalogus Translationum et Commentariorum: Mediaevel and Renaissance Latin Translations and Commentaries} (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1971), 2.239–322, 246. See here also for the \textit{Characters}' transmission to Italy. It is not clear exactly where Gremper acquired Lapo's manuscript, now listed as MS Vienna, Nationalbibliothek, cod. 199, ff. 4r–16v.

\textsuperscript{18} Following the distinction made by Paul F. Grendler in his 'Printing and censorship', in Charles B. Schmitt, Quentin Skinner, Eckhard Kessler and Jill Kraye (eds.), \textit{The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 25–54, 35, n. 6. This edition's influence lies in how Lapo's translation served as the basis for two further sixteenth-century Latin translations in 1531 and 1583 (even if, in both cases, the editors mistook it for a translation by Angelo Poliziano).


\textsuperscript{21} ‘In quo permulta colliguntur ab eo vicia, ac ita varie ac distincte ita urbane eleganterque exprimitur, ut facile in eo Aristotelicae disciplinae (cuixus sectator fuit) lumen appareat. Quare (ni forte contempseris) opinor te ex eo permultum utilitatis posse percipere, quod enim utilius aut accommodatius esse, qucet ei, qui amplissimis rebus, ut tu, administrandis praesets, et in eas cupiat cum dignitate versari, que tenere signa quaedam et notas quibus animos hominum, varias multiplicescque naturas diiudicare possit, cique suo consilio prudentiaque moderari ?’, Gremper, \textit{De caracteribus}, A3v.

\textsuperscript{22} This aspect of the \textit{Characters} fits into the Italian Renaissance's interest in texts that provide a means of navigating the daily practice of social relations. See Amedeo Quondam, \textit{Forma del vivere: L'etica del gentiluomo e i moralisti italiani} (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2010), 23.
the reader will be able to get close to men of the finest sort – a reading that would depend on the representation of virtue – Lapo here inverts the power dynamic, positioning the *Characters* as advice to a man of the finest sort about how to best deal with those around him who are not good. If in both readings, the *Characters* is imagined to be a text that helps its reader to better judge others, in Lapo’s version, it only requires bad examples to be able to do so. While Lapo’s reading shares with the Proem a similar scaffold and structure, it further differs in the aim it wishes to bring about: substituting a transformation in the reader’s virtue, for a transformation in the reader’s ability to best handle other people’s vice.

4. WILLIBALD PIRCKHEIMER AND ALBRECHT DÜRER

The second and rather different approach to the transformative effects of the *Characters* emerges in the succeeding translation of 1527 published by Pirckheimer in the newly Lutheran Nuremberg.

Pirckheimer had received the original Greek manuscript when it was sent to him by Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola in September 1515. Gianfrancesco wrote to Pirckheimer explaining that he hoped to use the *Characters* to redeem ‘the debt’ he owed him: a debt which possibly refers to advice that Pirckheimer gave Gianfrancesco the year before on a draft of his *De reformandis moribus oratio*, a discourse Gianfrancesco intended to address to Pope Leo X on the need for ecclesiastical reform. Gianfrancesco was not aware of just how apt his gift of thanks was for the action it seems to be thanking, but several years later, the connection between the *Characters* and the reforming of mores became very clear to Pirckheimer, when he decided to send his edition of Theophrastus’ text to Albrecht Dürer, explaining how it could help to improve people’s corrupt customs.

While the exchange of goods was common between these two friends – with Pirckheimer asking Dürer to pick him up precious stones, Greek manuscripts and birds’ feathers while the artist was in Venice – this seems to have been the only occasion on which Pirckheimer gave Dürer a book. Why it was this Greek text that he decided to dedicate to Dürer, what purpose he wanted his new Latin translation to serve and why he chose to do so at this moment in time – so many years after he had received the *Characters*
as a gift from Gianfrancesco – are all questions that remain unanswered.\textsuperscript{26} Tentative responses, however, are not hard to find, and lie embedded within the text of the dedication. It is by recovering them that we find an alternative orientation to how Theophrastus’ sketches of vice might have moral import.

Pirckheimer’s dedication begins by describing Theophrastus as having depicted ‘human feelings’.\textsuperscript{27} Despite the fact that the ‘feelings’ that Theophrastus represents do not correspond, as we know, to the more glamorous capital vices – the vices that make tragedies, and which present clear problems like Envy or Lust – Pirckheimer insists on taking them very seriously. These feelings, according to Pickheimer, are held in ‘the deepest recesses of the heart’, and are kept there, ‘most of the time’, through law and education.\textsuperscript{28} They only ‘erupt’ from their concealment if they have ‘occasion to do so’, and this occasion is when ‘the fear of lawgivers and pedagogues, by which they have long been constrained and suppressed has been removed’. At this point, vices burst out into the light of day, ‘and show themselves openly’.

If this sentence contains within it an argument of political philosophy – that the fear of the law and educators is needed to keep vices at bay – it is also a contemporary political comment, as for Pirckheimer, ‘the age we live in makes clear beyond all others’ that this principle is ‘wholly true’.\textsuperscript{29} The problem of ‘the age we live in’, Pirckheimer clarifies, is that ‘an excess of freedom’ has produced ‘an excess of contempt’, that people are no longer afraid of ‘lawgivers and pedagogues’ and are now therefore contemptuously showing their vices ‘openly’.\textsuperscript{30} This new lack of submission to authority means, as Pirckheimer’s dedication continues, that when lawgivers and pedagogues preach the truth, they are ignored rather than obeyed. The result is that ‘everywhere the truth is preached, yet (…) least performed, just as if the kingdom of God were better brought about by mere words than by works’.\textsuperscript{31}

The preference that this comparison betrays for salvation by ‘works’ rather than by ‘mere words’ exposes Pirckheimer’s ‘disillusionment’, as

\textsuperscript{26} Despite several mentions of the dedication, for example, in Willehad Paul Eckert and Christoph von Imhoff’s \textit{Willibald Pirckheimer. Dürers Freund im Spiegel seines Lebens seiner Werke und seiner Umwelt} (Köln: Wienand Verlag, 1971) there is no close investigation of its intention or textual detail.

\textsuperscript{27} ‘humanas affectiones’, Pirckheimer, \textit{Characteres}, a1v. I borrow here Ashcroft’s translation, in his \textit{Documentary}, 2.827–8, 827.

\textsuperscript{28} ‘Quae quidem legibus et institutione aliquantisper refrenatae, diutissime tamen aliquando se occultere solent, et non nisi data oportunitate ex altissimis cordium erumpere recessibus, ac si tum primum orientur, et non potius legalis illius paedagogi timore, iam pridem constrictae delituerint, quo è medio sublato, tum demum palaìm in lucem prodire, et manifeste se ostendere audent’, \textit{ibid.}, a1v.

\textsuperscript{29} ‘Quod quidem verissimum esse, vel praesentia tempora praec caeteris declarant’, \textit{ibid.}

\textsuperscript{30} ‘quibus nimia libertas, nimium etiam procreat contemptum’, \textit{ibid.}

\textsuperscript{31} ‘Ita ut licet passim veritas praedicetur, nil minus tamen interim quam quo quid illa exigit peragit, perinde ac regnum Dei in verbis potius nudis, quum operibus consistat peragenda’, \textit{ibid.}
Jeffrey Ashcroft describes, ‘with the failure (...) of the Lutheran reformation to improve personal and social morality’. 32 Pirckheimer had hosted Luther at his house in 1518, and had even been included in the excommunication bull against Luther in 1521, but by the time he wrote this, he had begun to disavow the Reform. 33 While for Luther, salvation is ‘instilled in us without our works by grace alone’, Pirckheimer reveals in this phrase that he thought that ‘works’ were still needed to achieve salvation; and that preaching was not enough to bring it about. 34 Pirckheimer’s dissatisfaction with Reform meant that he was looking for an alternative approach to moral education to those on offer, and one which would transform people’s actions, not only their beliefs. His options for what this alternative could be were, however, limited. He did not think that the swarm of vices which concerned him could be stopped by lawgivers preaching ‘the truth’, as these lawgivers no longer commanded any authority or inspired any fear. Nor did he think that these vices could be tempered by personal criticism of particular behaviour, as ‘we are all now so sensitive that no one can bear to hear his vices reproved’. 35

This is where Theophrastus’ Characters comes in. ‘Nothing’, Pirckheimer says, would be ‘more useful’ for a person who is too sensitive to criticism than reading the kinds of book of which the Characters is the ‘most excellent’ example. 36 The Characters, he thought, could get round the problem of being able to reform morals where preaching and critique could not, by virtue of two of its qualities. Firstly, how it delights rather than admonishes its reader, overcoming the need to rely on the now absent political emotion of fear. Secondly, how it encourages a process of corrective self-reflection that indirectly takes place while reading, avoiding any pointed reproach or critique.

The Characters is a book, as Pirckheimer continues, ‘in which each of us can contemplate the condition of his own soul as if in a mirror, and by contemplating improve it’. 37 These sketches of vice depict characters who you can, tellingly in our contemporary expression, ‘see yourself in’, inviting readers to identify with the vices, and then by a process of contemplation, to rid themselves of the vices that they feel they share. Just as you correct aspects of your body when contemplating your reflection in a mirror, Pirckheimer hopes that the reader will

32 Ashcroft, Documentory, 2.828.
35 ‘Proinde quum omnes adeo teneri simus, ut nemo vitia sua libenter reprehendere audiat’, Pirckheimer, Characters, a1v.
36 ‘nihil utilius censeo, quam eos relegere libellos (...) Ex quibus hunc vel praestantissimum iudico’, ibid., a1v–a2r.
37 ‘in quibus unusquisque proprii animi habitum tanquam in speculo quodam contemplari, ac contemplando emendare potest’, ibid.
correct aspects of their soul when reading and contemplating a text that is like a mirror. This introduces an unusual aesthetic process for what happens when a reader encounters images of vice. For Pirckheimer, it is not that a reader sees the embodiment of these vices as giving them license to carry them out, as someone like Plato feared. It is rather a process of moral instruction by a written text that works by a mechanism of what we might call *negative imitation*: where a reader identifies with a character and then decides to avoid the very behaviour that made them similar to this character in the first place.

This inverses an aesthetic that was ubiquitous across the newly Lutheran cities: seeing art as the provision of good moral examples to imitate. As Gerald Strauss puts it, in the newly reformed towns, moral indoctrination by good example was not only common but a ‘matter of urgency’. If Luther did not think that ‘works’ would achieve salvation, he did think that man was free to choose to follow the righteousness of the civil and moral law, and it was often to these precepts that this indoctrination tended. Texts of all genres were published with characters that showed ‘exemplary qualities in every life situation’, civil, moral and familial. Pirckheimer’s approach to the *Characters* then seems to have emerged from this Lutheran reformer tradition, even if it daringly reversed its central tenet, by highlighting the moral use of characters of ordinary vice rather than virtue.

If this goes some way to explain what Pirckheimer saw in printing an edition of this Greek text in 1527, we are still left with unravelling why he thought to send it to Dürer. A sense of Pirckheimer’s aims here can be found in two moments of the dedication, where he hints at how far the sketches in the *Characters* are like written images, and where he intimates that Dürer will be tempted to draw versions of them himself, ending by telling Dürer that ‘if you are not able to imitate it with your own brush, then at least turn it over diligently in your mind’. This implicit invitation for Dürer to make images of this text – perhaps to accompany Pirckheimer’s translation – furnishes a possible explanation of the link between the dedication’s argument about the ethical value of the *Characters* with its addressee. If Dürer were to create these images, they would not only hold


41 ‘si illam penicillo imitari nequis, mente saltem diligenter revolve’, Pirckheimer, *Characteres*, a2v.

the same ethically-improving potential as the text by appealing to a public who had otherwise been left unconvinced by admonishing preachers, but given the low literacy rate in Nuremberg, they could have bigger reach.\textsuperscript{43} This was a power that Nuremberg understood well, having banned all images of Luther in 1524, in the knowledge that political persuasiveness on a large scale lay as much in printed pictures as it did in words.\textsuperscript{44}

Having received the \textit{Characters} seven months before he died, Dürer has sadly not left any trace of an attempt at sketching a Theophrastan vice, preventing Pirckheimer from achieving this ambition. It is perhaps in part this failure to secure his alternative approach to moral reform that explains why, by 1530, Pirckheimer decided to return to a politics of fear. Writing to Johann Tschertte in the autumn, he concludes that when dealing with ‘the common man’, who has been led astray by preachers, now ‘nothing will avail but fear and tight defence’.\textsuperscript{45}

If Pirckheimer does not achieve his own intentions for his translation of this text, he does leave us with a legacy of a particular reading of the \textit{Characters} that introduces a new way of finding ethical purchase in these sketches of vice. He also initiates a connection between a moral reading of the \textit{Characters} and the context of Lutheranism which will reappear again and again across the sixteenth century, with all but three of the century’s subsequent editions being published in Protestant cities or by editors affiliated with the Reformation.\textsuperscript{46} This may only betray the well-understood connection between Lutheranism and the currents of German classical scholarship, as exemplified by figures such as Philipp Melanchthon, Andreas Osiander, Wolfgang Capito and Jacob Wimpfeling.\textsuperscript{47} But with this connection presenting a pattern, it is certainly possible that a part of the \textit{Characters}’ appeal lay in something close to Pirckheimer’s sense that this text embodied a reversed version of the Lutheran aesthetic of moral exemplarity. While the prefaces of these editions are often too brief (or non-existent) to confirm a reading of the \textit{Characters} that is directly similar to Pirckheimer’s, what we can see is how far these editors also took the \textit{Characters} to have moral import, by virtue of the choice of texts with which they chose to publish it.

\textsuperscript{43} On literacy, see Christiane Andersson, ‘The censorship of images in Nuremberg 1521–1527’, in Dagmar Eichberger and Charles Zika (eds.), \textit{Dürer and His Culture} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 164–78, 165. As R. W. Scribner has shown, in \textit{For the Sake of Simple Folk: Popular Propaganda for the German Reformation} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), the political potential of images was something that the Reformers understood well.

\textsuperscript{44} Andersson, ‘The censorship of images’, i., 168–9.

\textsuperscript{45} Pirckheimer to Johann Tschertte, Nuremberg, October-December 1530, in Ashcroft, \textit{Documentary}, 2.930–9, 933.

\textsuperscript{46} The exceptions are the editions of Venice (1552), and Paris (1557, 1583).

In these editions, the *Characters* is often either encased with texts of moral philosophy or anthologized within volumes that are clearly designed to this effect. We find the former in the 1582 edition by the Protestant exile Claude Auberi published in reformed Basel, where the *Characters* is sandwiched between Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* and selections of Pythagoras collected under the title *Fragmenta Ethica*. Auberi’s edition draws the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Characters* close together, by respectively titling the works *De Moribus* and *Morum characteres*.48 This connection with Aristotle is something that the 1584 Frankfurt edition follows, by placing the *Characters* in a Greek volume of Aristotle’s *Opera*. We find an example of the anthologizing approach in an edition published in 1589 in reformed Geneva, in which the *Characters* becomes one of four works extracted in the *Thesaurus philosophiae moralis*, alongside Cebes’ *Table*, Epictetus’ *Enchiridion* and the *Fragmenta Ethica*. In this volume, the reader was invited to search for a moral quality and then follow the pagination to find it elaborated or exemplified, sometimes through the means of a character. This is a structure that the *Thesaurus*’ editors might have borrowed from the reformer Conrad Gessner’s translations of Books 3 and 4 of Stobaeus’ *Anthology* which incorporates the *Characters* as examples of vices described via distinguishing ‘signs’ for the reader to look up in the index, in order to learn how to ‘live according to virtue’.49

5. LYCIUS, MOREL AND SPARTAN PEDAGOGY

While this account furnishes a sense of the scope and scale of this moral reading of the *Characters* as a text of practical philosophy, as well as a sense that it may have had a particular appeal to a Protestant sensibility, it skates over two editions which expose a third approach to explaining how this set of vices might instruct and inform a reader’s behaviour. These are the editions of Leonhard Lycius and Frédéric Morel, respectively published in Leipzig in 1561 and Paris in 1583. These two editions, far apart in time and location, are placed together by virtue of their mutual reliance on a story taken from Spartan history to explain their understanding of the intention underlying Theophrastus’ text.

‘What proof of honorable wisdom is shown by Clement of Alexandria (…) in his *Paedagogus* where he teaches that “Images and models are the largest part of the correct education”’, Lycius argues in his dedication to Gottfried Camerarius, the fifteen-year-old son of the Protestant philologist Joachim Camerarius.50 The *Paedagogus*, Lycius continues,

48 Auberi, *Aristotelis Ethicorum Nicomachiorum*, a1r, title page.
uses a very famous example of the Spartans, who, renowned for the great attention that they used to pay to the education of children, wished that one part of this would be as follows: they used to take their children to see young slaves who were obliged by their masters to get drunk on wine, so that – on seeing the disorderly behaviour brought on by their drunkenness – children would be educated to hate this vice and thereafter live with more moderation and sobriety.  

The educative notion here is that if free Spartan boys are introduced to wine through the sight of the ‘disorderly behaviour’ to which it can lead, they will avoid being tempted by alcohol in the future, associating this vice with shame and slavery rather than freedom and pleasure. The valence given to the representation of this behaviour is of crucial importance, as if the helots seem to be enjoying themselves when they are drunk, the moral instruction that the sight of them is supposed to furnish would be lost. For this educative process to work, it does not only seem crucial that the helots’ drunken behaviour is ‘disorderly’, but that the young boys observing it are completely sober; that they watch this spectacle unfold without sharing in any aspect of the vice by which it has been produced.

The moral instruction of the *Characters* is imagined by both Lycius and Morel to work in a similar way. Young readers, like Gottfried, will perceive vices through their embodiment in Theophrastus’ text. They will then observe that if they possessed these vices themselves, they would be ripe for ridicule, and so will try to avoid adopting them in the future. In the words of Morel, Theophrastus’ ‘characters of vice can help young people’, precisely the same way that ‘it was useful for the Spartan children to see the Helots often drunk on wine’. Morel’s insistence on the *Characters*’ capacity to instruct the young follows the indication in the Proem that the *Characters* is designed for Theophrastus and Polycles’ sons, and here clearly coheres with Lycius’ decision of to whom to dedicate his translation.

This is one of several new aspects that Lycius and Morel introduce in their approach to understanding the moral instruction of the *Characters*. Not only do they newly emphasize the way in which the *Characters* is designed to instruct the young; but outline the importance of making the vices seem unattractive, ridiculous or shameful, and furnish a sense that this is a text designed to correct vices that you might have in the future, rather than those which you already share. For Morel, all this justifies printing a book of vices that some might think will provoke more danger than it promises to heal. It is conversely, 

51 ‘utitur notissimo Lacedaemoniorum exemplo, qui cum institutionem puerilem magnae sibi curae esse patorentur, hanc illius esse partem quandam voluere, cum liberos ducerent ad spectandum servulos, qui vino se, iussu dominorum obruissent, ut conspecta ebrietatis deformitate, vitii huius odio imbuerentur, et magis continenter ac sobrie viverent’, ibid.

52 ‘Has vitii iuvenes posse juuare Notas:/Profuit ut quondam pueris Lacedaemone natis/Ilòtas madidos saepe videre mero’, Morel, De notis, C4r.
he argues, by showing these vices that, in his words, readers will learn ‘to avoid whatever crime’.  

6. CASAUBON, VIRTUES AND MIMESIS

It is with Casaubon’s influential translation published in Lyons in 1592 that we start to see a fundamental break with several of the lines we have been tracing in the Latin editions. For the first time in the century, we find an editor hazarding two moral approaches to the text that newly rely on the representation of both vice and virtue.

Casaubon, just like the earlier Latin translators, maintains that the *Characters* is a work that is interested in improving behaviour. Character-writing, he begins in his dedication to Nicolas Brûlart de Sillery and Henri IV of France, is the third and ‘most elegant’ way that the ancients had of instructing mores, along with dogmatic philosophy and exhortatory parae

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What is special about character-writing as a method of moral instruction is how it proposes to teach ethics through ‘a description of the way men behave, “such as they are”, (...) inclined to this or that virtue or vice’. By providing these descriptions of behaviour, Casaubon argues in the Prolegomena, ‘Theophrastus wanted to incite us [proeire] (...) to lead a straight and honest life’, a goal which could not be ‘more worthy of a philosopher’. This verb *proeire*, in its primary sense means, ‘to dictate a formula to someone who must repeat it’, providing a striking image, as Marc Escola notes, for how Casaubon thinks the *Characters* works on its reader. If Theophrastus is providing the reader with characters in the same way a tutor gives a student formulas to be repeated, he is in some way intending the reader to copy what they see, making these sketches ‘veritable models of behaviour’.

Casaubon makes clear how this mechanism of readerly imitation is to work when he discusses the relationship between the *Characters* and the genres of poetry, philosophy and history. What is unique about the *Characters*, in Casaubon’s view, is how far it stands as an ‘intermediate genre between the writings of philosophers and poets’. For Casaubon, the phi-

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53 ‘Lumina nec vitare hominum, sed crimina quaevis’, *ibid.*
55 ‘descriptione constat eorum quae homines aut hac aut illa virtute vitioque praediti, facere ã τοιοῦτοι εἰσιν consueverunt’, Isaac Casaubon, [...] *Theophrasti characteres ethicos. Liber commentarius* (Lyons, 1592), A4v.
56 ‘ad bene honesteque vitam degendam nobis hoc scripto proeire Theophrastus voluit: quo nihil est φιλοσοφικότερον, nihil philosopho dignius’, *ibid.*, A4r.
58 ‘véritables modèles de comportement’, *ibid.*
losopher ‘argues between virtue and vice, tells us to follow one and avoid
the other’.\textsuperscript{60} The poet’s approach, on the other hand – similar to the histor-
rian’s – does not treat virtues and vices in the abstract, but instead unfolds
‘before us the actions’ of ‘those to be followed and those to be avoided’, implicitly inviting us, ‘to examine the lives of other men and to draw from
them, for our own account, an example’.\textsuperscript{61} Being ‘an intermediate genre’
between philosophy and poetry is therefore being between one genre con-
cerned with promoting virtue and dismissing vice; and another concerned
with displaying good and bad moral examples, for readers to follow or
avoid. If the former accounts for the \textit{Characters}’ intention, and the latter
adds its method, together they work to refer to a text with a collection of
good and bad examples which aim, through encouraging imitation or
avoidance, to shape a reader’s actions.

This is the first moralizing approach to the \textit{Characters} that Casaubon out-
lines. He then continues, through a discussion of mimesis, to elaborate a
second way in which the \textit{Characters} is aligned with moral philosophy.
Casaubon argues that it is the text’s relationship with mimesis that accounts
for why the \textit{Characters} is a mixed genre between philosophy and poetry
rather than philosophy and history. The ‘great and profound difference
between the historian and the poet’, he explains, following Book 9 of
Aristotle’s \textit{Poetics}, is that ‘the former simply tells the facts as they happened’
whereas the latter can narrate things that ‘may have taken place’.\textsuperscript{62} The
relationship here with mimesis is that the poet’s freedom from the past
brings with it one new constraint: by virtue of dealing with the possible, the
poet must work to make the possible seem like it really took place. The
poet, Casaubon continues, must therefore provide ‘an acceptable image’ of
all they create, a demand that makes them ‘a “mimetès”, an imitator, as
Plato also says’.\textsuperscript{63}

Casaubon emphasizes the way in which the \textit{Characters} betrays this degree of
poetic mimesis by repeatedly comparing it to a mirror, drawing out a different
use for this metaphor to the way in which we saw Pirckheimer deploy it above.
‘The mores of men have been described in the original state of this work’,
Casaubon argues, ‘so that one can, on the one hand, contemplate in a mirror
the brilliance of virtue in its most beautiful light and, on the other hand,
become aware of the indignity and inappropriateness of vices’.\textsuperscript{64} If in

\textsuperscript{60} ‘de virtute enim et vitio disputans, illam sequendam, hoc fugiendum nos docet’, \textit{ibid.}, A4r.

\textsuperscript{61} ‘factáque nobis et mores utrorúmque explicantes, imitantórum atque fugiendorum exempla suppedi-
tant: et tacitè quodammodo nos inspicere in vitas hominum iubent, atque ex aliis sumere exemplum nobis’,
\textit{ibid.}, A4v.

\textsuperscript{62} ‘Rursus autem magna est latáque inter historicum et poetam differentia: ille res gestas, uti gestae sunt,
simpliciter narrat: hic et gestas (…) et quae geri potuerunt’, \textit{ibid.}

\textsuperscript{63} ‘cum decenti imitatione exequitur (…) Omnis enim poeta μιμητῆς, ait idem Plato’, \textit{ibid.}

\textsuperscript{64} ‘Mores igitur hominum ita hic olim erant descripti, ut liceret tanquam in speculo hinc virtutis splen-
dorem et pulcherrimam intueri faciem: illinc verò viitiorum turpitudinem et dedecus animadvertère’, \textit{ibid.}, A5r.
Pirckheimer’s dedication, the reader would see the condition of their own soul and ‘by contemplating improve it’, for Casaubon, what they see in the mirror of the Characters is virtue and vice in and of themselves. ‘The work was in fact a sort of portrait, or mirror’ Casaubon continues, ‘in which the distinctive features of each of the virtues and vices could be distinguished and highlighted’. 65 This idea that the Characters reveals the nature of virtue and vice is Casaubon’s second moral approach, an approach less orientated towards shaping a reader’s actions, than with furnishing them with a kind of knowledge of mores.

This emphasis on how the Characters provides a set of models of the kinds of behaviours ‘to be followed’ as well as ‘to be avoided’ and a faithful exposure of virtue and vice, introduces a different constellation for how we might understand the purpose of the Characters, distinct to those offered by previous editors in the century. Its two approaches are more closely inspired by the Proem’s double pledge to provide both moral guidance and clarificatory knowledge, and just like the Proem, both of these approaches fall into the trap of being tied to a text which contains virtues as well as vices. Casaubon’s innovation here is that, unlike the previous editors, he does not attempt to provide an argument for how these bad examples alone can produce these effects, but instead accounts for how the virtues must have been present in the text’s original state. ‘Unfortunately’, he says, ‘the best part of the work has been lost, the part that concerned virtues is now completely lacking’. 66

In a final discussion in the Prolegomena about the meaning of the title of the Characters, Casaubon lays the groundwork for one further rupture with the sixteenth-century tradition: associating the ancient practice of character-writing not only with ethics, but with rhetoric and satire. He here draws connections with how Cicero considers what he calls notatio, and what the Greeks called ethopoeia – the production (poiein) of character (ethos) – an essential part of the orator’s toolkit. He further points to how characters in the style of Theophrastus can be found in Greek and Roman satire, particularly in Varro. These two contexts explain why Casaubon did not choose to place his edition of the Characters with texts of moral philosophy, as the earlier sixteenth-century editors did, but instead with a section from the Rhetorica ad Herennium on the practice of notatio; and a poem from Horace’s Satires describing a garrulous man’s character. 67

Several aspects of Casaubon’s break with the earlier editions had significant and lasting impact. Casaubon’s insistence on the loss of corresponding

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65 ‘Erat namque hoc tamquam exemplar et speculum quoddam morum, ubi virtutis et vitii cuiusque expressae notae cernebantur’, ibid., A5r–v.
66 ‘Nunc, melior eius pars, proh dolor! intercidit: nam et ea pars quae erat de virtutibus tota hodie desideratur’, Casaubon, ibid., A5r.
67 Casaubon, Theophrasti characteres ethici, f2r–f4v.
virtues was picked up by Joseph Hall, who decided to add characters of virtue to his English adaptation of Casaubon’s edition of the text. Hall’s edition, bringing character-writing into the vernacular, in turn inspired a wave of characters in English, French and German, several of which included virtues. 68 With Casaubon’s edition becoming the standard translation of the *Characters* over the centuries – ‘reprinted more than thirty times before 1800’ as Charles B. Schmitt details – the connections that he started to draw with rhetoric and satire also both left their mark. 69 By 1659, the anonymous editor of a new preface to Casaubon’s edition acknowledged that it was no longer sufficient to think of Theophrastus only as a moral philosopher, but that we now ‘must also consider a rhetorical function’ of the text. 70 This association with rhetoric revived a classification of the *Characters* that had been present from the 9th century, and which today remains a plausible original intention. 71 The impact is no less strong in relation to satire, with a recent introduction to satire describing how far Casaubon’s edition of Theophrastus ‘stimulated the development of a new satirical form which was to become popular across Europe for some two centuries, and whose effects continue to the present’. 72

7. CONCLUSION

One further unexpected effect of Casaubon’s edition that has emerged in the present is a revival of his reading that the *Characters* treads a middle path between poetry, history and philosophy. This is to be found in Barbara Carnevali and Pascal Engel’s work in the philosophy of literature. Both turn to Casaubon’s underlining of the philosophical interest of *ethopoeia*, and its genesis in the *Characters*, to inform their respective theories of literary cognitivism. In Carnevali’s view, we are much ‘indebted to Casaubon’ for his reading of the *Characters*, as he here provides us with a ‘profound meditation on the nature and moral function of mimesis’, showing us how the faithful description of mores is able to provide the reader with a kind of ‘moral knowledge’ about a habit, custom or affect. 73 For Engel, reading Carnevali (who is reading Casaubon), the *Characters* equally provides an example of how literature

70 ‘Praeterquum enim quod propric ad moralem Philosophum pertinet eique in cognoscendis corrigendas hominum vitii insignem operam navat, non exiguum quoque usum praestat Rhetori’, *Theophrasti notationes morum* (Braunschweig, 1659), 1:(6v).
73 Carnevali, ‘Literary Mimesis’, 300.
furnishes ‘practical knowledge’ of ‘what it is like’ to experience a particular emotion, or to live a particular ‘kind of life’. 74

The application of Casaubon’s approach to the Characters to broader problems in the philosophy of literature raises the tempting question of whether the earlier interpretative tradition examined here might be able to make its own contribution. Each of the arguments that we have seen in this approach to moral instruction by bad example turns on two axes: the impact of the Characters on transforming actions; and the way in which this can happen solely through the representation of vice. If we wish to investigate whether this tradition might similarly expose a more general poetics, we might start by moving away from the dated language of vice and reframe this tradition as dealing with how the representation of troublesome, problematic or cruel behaviours in literature can lead to readers becoming better or good.

This is an issue that has proved particularly important for Richard Rorty, who formulates his philosophy of literature precisely as grappling with the question of how books that describe ‘the ways in which particular sorts of people are cruel to other particular sorts of people’ might somehow ‘help us become less cruel’. 75 If we consider it in these terms, the earlier interpretative tradition of the Characters would provide us with three distinct arguments to this effect. From Lapo, we gain the idea that seeing a representation of a character who is cruel will teach a reader how to best handle the kind of people who seem cruel in a similar way. From Pirckheimer, the argument that reading about a character who is cruel will provoke a process of self-reflection, where the reader will demand whether they have the same tendencies for this kind of cruelty themselves, and, if so, work to correct them. From Lycius and Morel, the notion that showing cruelty to be ridiculous and shameful will convince young readers to avoid practicing it in the future.

To examine how these three approaches might contribute something to the ethics of literature, we might turn to consider them in relation to one of Rorty’s central examples: Nabokov’s Lolita. In Rorty’s view, the moment in which Humbert goes to a barber in Kasbeam provides the key to the ethics of this novel. Nabokov describes this encounter as follows:

In Kasbeam a very old barber gave me a very mediocre haircut: he babbled of a baseball-playing son of his, and, at every explodent, spat into my neck, and every now and then wiped his glasses on my sheet-wrap, or interrupted his tremulous scissor work to produce faded newspaper clippings, and so inattentive was I that it came as a shock to realize as he pointed to an easelled photograph among the

74 Engel, ‘Literature and Practical Knowledge’, 70.
ancient gray lotions, that the moustached young ball player had been dead for the last thirty years.\textsuperscript{76}

In Rorty’s view, ‘this sentence epitomizes Humbert’s lack of curiosity — his inattentiveness to anything irrelevant to his own obsession’.\textsuperscript{77} In doing so, he argues, it opens our eyes to the moral of \textit{Lolita}, which is, as Rorty puts it, not to ‘keep one’s hands off little girls but to notice what one is doing, and in particular to notice what people are saying’.\textsuperscript{78}

Rorty’s reading contains here the argument that Nabokov’s representation of cruelty will lead the reader to notice Humbert’s flaw, to investigate what they share with it, and to work to amend it in themselves in the future. In this it is a reading that is closely aligned with the second of the three approaches that we have seen to the \textit{Characters}: Pirckheimer’s. But if we were to apply the other two arguments, we would gain two very different interpretations. For Lylius and Morel, the poverty and torment of Humbert’s life would be enough to encourage readers of \textit{Lolita} to avoid behaving in anything like a similar manner themselves: a reading that would strongly rely on the way in which Humbert’s life was depicted. In Lapo’s reading, which provides perhaps a more compelling approach to the ethics of this novel, we would find the alternative idea that it would teach the reader how to better react to people who share a vice like Humbert’s: whether that means to keep people like Humbert at a distance, or to attempt to help them, having noticed their detached behaviour as a warning sign for how they might be treating others in their lives.

From this case, we gain a sense of how the translators of the \textit{Characters} might help to expose alternative approaches to the question of whether we can find virtue in vice. If we feel that this example could open further vistas, this sixteenth-century misreading – a misreading in so far as it works from the claims of the spurious Proem – would start to open up a different and multifaceted Theophrastan aesthetic to the one that Carnevali and Engel have recently discerned. Rather than a literary approach which focuses on clarification, as derived from an aspect of Casaubon’s commentary, it would be one which tells us something about the relationship between literature and action, and which could therefore contribute to questions about how the representation of cruelty makes us behave. Just as these sixteenth-century editors curiously, conversely and even dialectically thought that vice could instruct virtue; the proposal here is that their misreading should not be forgotten, but might be able, in all of its shining error, to shed light on the ethics of literature.

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\textsuperscript{76} Vladimir Nabokov, \textit{Lolita} (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1959), 208.

\textsuperscript{77} Rorty, ‘The barber of Kasbeam’, 163.

\textsuperscript{78} \textit{Ibid.}, 164.
Abstract
Theophrastus’ *Characters*, a collection of thirty short sketches of Athenian men, each defined by a particular vice, ran into sixteen editions in sixteenth-century Europe, with editors often thinking that these bad examples could teach readers how to behave. This article exposes three distinct arguments these editors used to defend this idea. For Lapo da Castiglionchio the Younger, these sketches show us how to discern other people’s natures, in order to better manipulate them. For Willibald Pirckheimer, sending his translation to Albrecht Dürer in the hope he would illustrate it, the *Characters* provides a novel means of social control and a vehicle for corrective self-reflection. For Leonhard Lycius and Frédéric Morel, it is a pedagogical device for encouraging children to avoid adopting bad habits. While the *Characters* has recently emerged in discussions about the cognitive value of literature – with arguments being made that its descriptions of types offer moral or practical knowledge (Carnevali, 2010; Engel, 2016) – these claims have hinged on Isaac Casaubon’s later editions. By recovering this earlier interpretive approach, this article points to an alternative way in which Theophrastus’ sketches can shed light on the relationship between ethics and literature.