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THEOPHRASTUS' 'OLIGARCH' AND THE POLITICAL INTENTION OF THE *CHARACTERS*

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The intention of Theophrastus' *Characters* still escapes us. This paper offers a new answer to that centuries-old question by looking closely at the one political sketch of the collection: 'The Oligarch' (C.26). We argue that C.26 reveals a political intention in the *Characters*, presenting oligarchy as the inherently flawed projection of a character trait onto political events. Read in this way, C.26 appears as a medium through which Theophrastus can take a definite but careful stance in contemporary Athenian politics.

Introduction

The most recent article questioning the intention of Theophrastus' *Characters* describes it as the 'history of an enigma': a riddle that has puzzled generations of scholars and has split them into four main camps.[1] According to this tradition, this set of thirty short sketches of ordinary vices should be seen as part of a treatise of moral philosophy, a rhetorical exercise, an appendix to dramatic theory or a literary miscellany. The means of determining this intention has for the most part been intertextual, with a major focus on the correspondences between individual characters and Aristotle's *Ethics*, *Rhetoric* and *Poetics*, as well as with the *Tractatus Coislinianus*. There is, however, one character who has mostly escaped exegetical attention, but who we claim might help us unlock a new answer to this riddle: the only political character in Theophrastus' collection, the Oligarch (C.26).[2]

Looking closely at this character, we first encounter one striking detail: this is a *bad* oligarch, an oligarch who does not represent his side well and is an object of ridicule rather than a serious political challenger. He makes self-contradictory statements, he does not have any followers and he avoids carrying out the political actions that would typically

1 Ranocchia (2011). Unless otherwise noted, all translations are our own.

2 Spina (1981) addresses the sketch but without providing a close reading of the text, which is the intention of the present paper.

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gain him support and control. Theophrastus' choice to depict the Oligarch as bad becomes all the more apparent when we compare him to previous models of oligarchy with which Theophrastus could have been familiar: those we find in Critias, Pseudo-Xenophon's *Constitution of the Athenians*, Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Politics*. Where, in these texts, oligarchy is presented as a serious or even reasonable political alternative, in the *Characters* the Oligarch does everything in his power to render his desired πολιτεία unappealing, unattractive and unlikely to be realised. This is confirmed by a comparison of C.26 with what we know of Classical Greek oligarchy.[3]

The observation that Theophrastus' man is a *bad* oligarch leads us to question what Theophrastus might have intended when he wrote this sketch, and to revisit the issue of the intention of the collection as a whole.[4] Working from the notion that Theophrastus was neither a purely theoretical philosopher, nor a philosopher unquestioningly supportive of oligarchy and monarchy, we posit that the political undercurrents in this text suggest an intention that is much more engaged with contemporary politics than has previously been understood.

Theophrastus lived in a time of frequent regime change, when political actors were intent on 'navigating the troubled waters of the new world of Hellenistic kingdoms'.[5] These political upheavals brought specific threats to Peripatetic philosophers.[6] As details from his life indicate, Theophrastus tried to steer clear of political entanglements that could prejudice his position. He nonetheless developed a body of work that would qualify him as a political philosopher, and there are grounds for thinking that he also participated in certain political actions.[7] While the political aspects of Theophrastus' life and work are generally overlooked, this paper wishes to take them seriously, as a basis for investigating whether there is a politics to his *Characters*. Theophrastus' political treatises are known only by titles and fragments, but the evidence suggests constant engagement with questions of governance, legislation, political education and crises. This interest extended to Athenian politics, with Theophrastus known to have made comments about leading Athenian statesmen, including Demosthenes and Demades.[8]

Theophrastus, however, knew how to convey a message without incurring too much risk. Writing about music, he expressed how 'souls are more attentive to melodies when they are concealed than to that which is manifest and whose meaning is apparent to them'.[9] We take the *Characters* to have been written in a similar spirit – a text that critiques bad citizenship, especially its oligarchic variety, without exposing its author to political attacks. We therefore

3 See Caire (2016), Simonton (2017).

4 We use the understanding of intention in Skinner (1969).

5 Luraghi (2014) 219. See also Bayliss (2011) 145.

6 On Theophrastus' life, see Schneider (2016).

7 Podlecki (1985). We know from Diogenes Laertius (5.43–49) that Theophrastus wrote several political treatises. Plutarch mentions that Theophrastus twice liberated Eresus from tyranny (*Mor.* 1097b; 1126f). For an evaluation of this as probable, see Ebner-Landy (2022).

8 *FHS&G* 706.

9 *FHS&G* 725 in Gutas' translation.

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defend the view that, without prejudicing other possible intentions, the *Characters* should be read as a medium for Theophrastus' careful expression of his political opinions.

Millett has paved the way for a political reading of the *Characters* by arguing that Theophrastus' text aims at teaching 'not how to be a good man; nor even necessarily how to be a good citizen, [but] how to be good at being a citizen in the context of a democratic polis'.[10] In our view, Millett's claim can be broadened: Theophrastus is offering a conception of good citizenship suitable for not only a democracy, but a variety of regimes, corresponding to the different constitutions Athens experienced from 323 to 307. We make this claim for the *Characters* and not just for 'The Oligarch', as the Oligarch's vice of preventing the smooth running of politics is not unique to him, but is shared across the collection. Numerous defects of this kind can be found, we argue, in at least fifteen other sketches.[11]

We proceed in three steps to make this argument. We first show how a close reading of C.26, as well as a comparison with other depictions of oligarchy in fifth- and fourth-century Athenian discourse, reveal how Theophrastus made a careful choice in depicting the Oligarch as inept and presenting him as a type who projects a fixed character onto various issues and events. We then examine Theophrastus' possible intentions in writing this sketch by situating him in contemporary politics. In a third section, we look at how these intentions are connected to a broader project of redefining political virtue, a project which can be found across the *Characters*, as well as in Theophrastus' other works.

1. Making the Oligarch ridiculous

1.1 *A self-contradictory character*

We find a first trace of the Oligarch's self-contradictory nature in a scene set in the assembly, where men are discussing the preparations for the Great Dionysia (26.2).[12] The issue in question is the appointment of assistants to help the archon in the festival's organisation.

The Oligarch steps forward to argue for the nomination of several all-powerful (αὐτοκράτορας) assistants. On the one hand, this fits an oligarchic agenda, which favours limiting the assembly's power.[13] On the other, it is completely out of place, as a minor occasion like this does not require plenipotentiary powers, which were only called for in extraordinary circumstances.[14] The notion of plenipotentiary powers has such

10 Millett (2007) 109.

11 *Char.* 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 10, 11, 21, 22, 23, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30.

12 Throughout the paper, we use the text of Diggle (2004), including for the sketches' titles, unless otherwise indicated.

13 Ilberg (1897) 220: 'Bei dem Oligarchen ist die Forderung der Selbstherrlichkeit zur fixen Idee geworden'. On the opposition between αὐτοκράτωρ and ὑπεύθυνος, see Jebb (1870) 18 and Ussher (1960) 216 (who refers to Pl. *Leg.* 875b). On εὔθυναι at Athens, see Hansen (1991) 237–9, and Fröhlich (2004).

14 See, for instance, Andoc. *Myst.* 15; Thuc. 8.67.1.

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appeal for the Oligarch that he wants to implement it no matter the case.[15] After the people decide to appoint a board of ten officials to assist the archon for the festival, the Oligarch is, however, shown to no longer argue for several plenipotentiary assistants but instead to favour concentrating power into the hands of one man (ἱκανὸς εἷς ἐστί). The Oligarch's move from the many to the one (which seems to point to the potential for oligarchy to slide into tyranny) is a structure mirrored by his knowledge of only *one* Homeric line (ἓν μόνον), which itself discusses the rule of one (εἷς κοίρανος, 26.2).[16] It is by citing this line that the Oligarch justifies his ideas: 'it is not good that many should be kings; let there be one king' (*Il.* 2.204).

However, by the end of the sketch, the Oligarch returns to favouring the existence of 'many kings'. While proceeding to discuss Athenian constitutional history, the Oligarch criticises Theseus for abolishing the several monarchies that existed before his reign by uniting them under it. This is incoherent with the Oligarch's preferred Homeric line, as Theseus did just what it suggests, replacing several monarchies with the rule of one. By exposing the contradiction between the Homeric quotation and the criticism of Theseus, Theophrastus shows that the Oligarch does not understand the implications of his various statements.[17] To characterise the Self-Contradictory Man in this way would be consistent, but given that the author's purpose is to represent oligarchy, the choice to ridicule it here merits our attention.

Alongside the Oligarch's self-contradictory politics, Theophrastus reveals his inept comments, such as his idea that any official should be a 'real man' (ἀνήρ, 26.2).[18] Here, the Oligarch is confusing contexts that might call for manliness (a battle, for instance, the situation to which his line of Homer refers) with the daily business a democracy has to handle.[19] The Oligarch's use of ἀνήρ resounds with Homeric echoes: Homeric warriors are often called to show themselves true ἀνέρες by displaying their physical strength.[20] This was not the kind of virtue, however, that democratic Athens required.[21] Athenian

15 Navarre (1924) 167: 'Féru du principe d'autorité, il l'applique hors de propos à des choses qui n'en valent pas la peine'; Steinmetz (1960) 295: 'Fanatisiert, wie er ist, bringt er halt bei jeder passenden und unpassenden Gelegenheit die Forderungen seiner Partei vor'.

16 We thank Simon Verdun for his observation about the role of the 'one' in this sketch. On the historical oligarchs' latent tendency towards sole rule, see Simonton (2017) 67–8. If this seems to have been an 'oligarchic catchphrase', it is a curious thing to say in this context, as the assistant the Oligarch wants to see appointed will not be given supreme authority as a Homeric κοίρανος; but rather will remain under the authority of the ἄρχων himself. Here, see Simonton (2017) 114 n. 27.

17 Steinmetz (1960) 298, speaks of 'Schlagworten'. Theophrastus seems to have had an eye for political contradictions: as Millett (2007) 91 notes, the Friend of Villains claims to be a democrat, but loves being a leader of the people (29.6).

18 On the aristocratic connotations of this word, see e.g. Hom. *Il.* 5.529 and Eur. *El.* 693.

19 Theophrastus would have been aware that his Oligarch was not the only man to make that mistake: we know from Plutarch (Plut. *Mor.* 301c = *FHS&G* 624) that Theophrastus narrated a story in which Deinon of Tarentum, a talented soldier (ἀνὴρ δ᾽ὢν ἀγαθός ἐν τοῖς πολεμικοῖς), ratified a proposition, against which the people had voted, on the grounds that it was 'stronger'.

20 Bassi (2003) 33 n. 24.

21 See Bassi (2003) 42 on ἀνδρεία; see Whitehead (1993) 57–9 on ἀνδραγαθία (who shows that Athenian public discourse, either in oratory or decrees, had by the 330s started praising citizens for their ἀνδραγαθία).

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public discourse did not praise manliness in itself, but only if it were exercised for the people's good, in accordance with justice and moderation.[22] If we take the fragments of *De eligendis magistratibus* to be Theophrastan, we can see that Theophrastus himself did not think that manliness was needed in democratic politics, let alone in organising the Dionysia: the virtues required of magistrates are δικαιοσύνη, φρόνησις, εὐνοία, πίστις, δεινότης, ἐπιμελεία, and ἐμπειρία, not manliness.[23]

Even more strikingly, perhaps, the Oligarch himself does not act like a 'real man':[24] he is not a courageous, outspoken opponent of democracy, but chooses to vent his most virulent anti-democratic feelings in the city streets at midday, when no one is there to hear him.[25] He wishes to be 'rid of the mob and the market-place' (26.3), avoiding face-to-face opposition with the people and their democratic leanings.[26] In this the Oligarch reveals himself to be a coward, a character with no strong political will.[27] One final and related contradiction characterises the Oligarch. By identifying with those who seek office (he uses the first-person plural in 26.3), the Oligarch communes, in a sense, with the political life of Athenian democracy. At the same time, the sketch is aimed at exposing how far he stands in opposition to the people: he wishes to 'withdraw from the crowd and the agora' and to found a city with his oligarchic peers (26.3). His political position is therefore essentially confused: the Oligarch does not understand the full implications of his desire to participate in democracy.[28]

Several aspects of Theophrastus' choice to represent the Oligarch in this way are notable when compared with the Athenian tradition of writing about oligarchy.[29]

1.2. *Oligarchs in Athenian political thought*

1.2.1. Unsuccessful and bad oligarchy: Theophrastus and Aristotle's *Politics*. Millett argues that the *Characters* was primarily directed at the Lyceum and its members. Upon reading the *Characters*, members of the Lyceum, in his words, would think, 'at least I don't behave like

22 Roisman (2003).

23 On the Theophrastan authorship, see Aly (1943) 48–9; Keaney and Szegedy-Maszak (1976). Note that while Ἰταμότης may come close to manliness, it is mentioned last of all (ll. 96–7) and with a strong caveat (ἂν ἔχθιστον ᾖ, ll. 97–8). Organising the Dionysia, in any case, has nothing to do with boldness (ἰταμότης).

24 Nor is he an ἀνήρ ἀγαθός, since if we believe Xenophon's *Symposium*, knowing Homer by heart was an essential qualification for being one, and the Oligarch falls far short of this standard.

25 26.4: τὸ μέσον δὲ τῆς ἡμέρας.

26 26.3: τῆς ἀγορᾶς ἀπαλλαγῆναι (Diggle's translation). See on this point Millett (1998) 226–7. Jebb (1870) 19 and Diggle (2004) 469 only consider the first explanation; the glossator who added section 6 (καὶ τοιαῦτα ἕτερα πρὸς τοὺς ξένους καὶ τῶν πολιτῶν τοὺς ὁμοτρόπους καὶ ταὐτὰ προαιρουμένους) must have had the second in mind (note that Pasquali (1919) saw the section as genuine).

27 Pasquali (1919) 58 n. 1.

28 This recalls the paradox Socrates spots in Callicles at Pl. *Grg.* 481c5–482a2.

29 Here we do take up the method of intertextuality which scholars working on the *Characters* have used so far; however, we add to the intertextual set and combine this method with others (especially attention to the political context).

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that, but then I've read and understood my Aristotle'.[30] Millett does not, however, draw the implications of his idea for the interpretation of C.26. Seen in this light, Theophrastus' Oligarch ignores a number of important lessons that readers of Aristotle's *Politics* would know well.

First, Theophrastus' Oligarch shows no sign of civic virtue, in the way Aristotle conceived it. For Aristotle, the only link between wealth and virtue is that rich people tend to be well educated and highborn (to have παιδείαν καὶ εὐγένειαν, 1293b37), and are therefore less likely to be bribed ('the rich are judged to [already] have what makes people act unjustly', ἔτι δὲ δοκοῦσιν ἔχειν οἱ εὔποροι ὧν ἕνεκεν οἱ ἀδικοῦντες ἀδικοῦσιν, 1293b38–9). Theophrastus' Oligarch, however, though rich, is not well educated and his taste for luxury makes him a likely candidate for bribery. Before going on his solitary walks in the streets of Athens, he makes sure his looks are impeccable: he puts on his cloak, cuts his hair short and carefully does his nails.[31] He shows no concern for the public good, but only for his private interest: liturgies for him are simply a way for an ungrateful (ἀχάριστον) people to destroy the rich (cf. ἀπολλύμενοι, 26.5) – he feels no obligation to perform them, nor does he acknowledge the honorific benefits he and his peers can derive from them.[32]

Not only does the Oligarch flout the rules of good citizenship, but he also abandons any hope for guaranteeing a stable polis that would work in his interest. According to Aristotle, if oligarchs want their regime to last, they must mitigate, not accentuate, its oligarchic elements (1309b20–1). They should thus avoid drastic measures such as 'harming the crowd and banning them from town' (τὸ κακοῦν τὸν ὄχλον καὶ τὸ ἐκ τοῦ ἄστεως ἀπελαύνειν, 1311a13–14). Theophrastus' man, however, would do exactly the opposite: 'either they [the people] or we should live in the city' (ἤ τούτους δεῖ ἢ ἡμᾶς οἰκεῖν τὴν πόλιν, 26.3), he says. He further uses deprecatory words to designate the people: 'the mob' (τοῦ ὄχλου), 'the multitude' (τὸ πλῆθος),[33] 'them' (τούτων, τούτους); advises his group 'not to come close' (πλησιάζοντας) to the people by seeking office and refuses to live in the same city as sycophants (διὰ τοὺς συκοφάντας οὐκ οἰκητόν ἐστιν ἐν τῇ πόλει). In other words, he would ban the crowd not only from the town, but from the city itself (26.3) – a πλεονεξία that is exactly what tends to cause popular revolts and bring oligarchies to their ruin (1297a11–12).

Finally, to endure, an oligarchy – in Aristotle's argument – must not be the rule of a clique but should involve competent individuals chosen from the ranks of the people (1308a3–11, 1309a20–32). It should further practice civic benefaction on a large scale (1231a31–5), ensuring material gains (κέρδος) to the people (1308a9–10). Theophrastus'

30 Millett (2007) 31.

31 26.4: καὶ τὸ μέσον δὲ τῆς ἡμέρας ἐξιὼν τὸ ἱμάτιον ἀναβεβλημένος καὶ μέσην κουρὰν κεκαρμένος καὶ ἀκριβῶς ἀπωνυχισμένος σοβεῖν.

32 For other versions of the complaint that the *demos* is ἀχάριστος, see Hdt. 5.91.2; Pl. [*Ax.*] 369a; Plut. *Dion* 38.5.

33 At 26.4, Diggle (2004) 472 prints τὸ πλῆθος, following many previous editors. We take it that the word is here taken in its pejorative sense (see LSJ *s.v.* A-2-b, with a convincing parallel at Ps-Xen. 2.18).

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character, however, shows no sign of fulfilling these two obligations.[34] Even a concern for stability does not move him to accept liturgies.

This confrontation of the Oligarch's behaviour with Aristotelian political theory sheds light on the inner contradictions we saw above: the character repeatedly alludes to his wish to establish an oligarchic regime; but were he to do so, his regime would undermine itself very quickly. The party spirit he evinces comes close to the partisanship Aristotle criticises in contemporary oligarchs, who go so far as to swear to treat the people as badly as they can (1310a9–10). The Oligarch's scorn for the unkempt appearance of his fellow citizen (he is ashamed to be seen sitting next to 'some thin and squalid fellow', 26.4) is typical of the criticism Aristotle would have him avoid. In addition, if Theophrastus' Oligarch were in power, he might even face opposition from his own party. In Aristotle's view, a further issue with oligarchy is that each member will strive to concentrate power in his own hands, causing inner strife and failure of the regime (1305b36–7). In light of the Homeric line Theophrastus' Oligarch is fond of quoting, this seems a likely outcome.[35]

Theophrastus' character is therefore a bad oligarch – bad at carrying out this political role because he undermines the very purpose he claims to have. Aristotle himself recognises that oligarchs come in different varieties: one can be a 'good' oligarch if one is moderate.[36] Theophrastus' character does exactly the contrary, migrating to the extreme of his own partisan group. Yet he is presented, not as a specific kind of oligarch (the most extreme), but as '*the* Oligarch', as if Theophrastus denied that oligarchs could be any different. This is especially striking given the much more refined, and dangerous, oligarchic figures represented in Athenian political discourse.

1.2.2. Unsophisticated oligarchy: Theophrastus compared with Critias and Pseudo-Xenophon. Two figures loom large in our picture of the Athenian oligarchic landscape: the so-called 'Old Oligarch' or Pseudo-Xenophon, author of a *Constitution of the Athenians* that deftly criticises democracy; and Critias, leading member of the Thirty in 404/403, uncle of Plato and author of *Constitutions* in prose and verse. While we cannot be certain that Theophrastus knew these authors, nor that these are the only texts about oligarchy Theophrastus could have accessed, they indicate the wide spectrum of Athenian oligarchic discourse against which contemporary readers would compare Theophrastus' sketch.[37]

34 The same lessons can be drawn from Plato (*Rep.* 8): in his story of the oligarchic regime, Plato shows how the oligarchs' honouring of money causes them to monopolise offices and political participation, leading to a democratic revolution.

35 Simonton (2017) 68 shows that this was a real issue for Greek oligarchies in the Classical period, as noted by Caire (2016) 313.

36 *Pol.* 1310a19–25. See on this point Sikkenga (2011) 51–53, and Skultety (2011) 99.

37 Caire (2020) carefully studies the reception of Pseudo-Xenophon in fourth-century Athens and argues that Theophrastus did know the *Constitution of the Athenians* and that C.26 in particular shows a possible echo (p. 51). In terms of Critias, it is at the very least likely that Theophrastus knew the man who plays such a large

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Critias puts forward a consistent model for political reform, from democracy to oligarchy, mostly on the basis of his admiration of Spartan moderation (DK B 32).[38] Critias was a vehement critic of Athenian luxury: the democratic Periclean city resembled in his eyes a rowdy symposium (DK B 6; DK B 33), a huge bazaar into which all sorts of goods flew (DK B 2) and a breeding ground for softness (τρυφή, DK B 31).[39] Critias' scorn also targeted the wealthy, when they claimed to rule without being properly educated (DK B 29). Critias himself was highly learned, as his poetic output testifies. Comparing the Theophrastan Oligarch to this portrait, we find a figure with similar political preferences, but who holds them without the mitigating qualities that Critias himself possessed: Theophrastus' man is both uneducated (26.2), as we have seen, and luxurious (26.4). When considering this character with Critias in mind, a reader or listener would think that Theophrastus' defender of oligarchy was a significantly less sophisticated political opponent to democracies.

The second oligarchic *comparandum* for C.26 is Pseudo-Xenophon's *Constitution of the Athenians*.[40] The author of the pamphlet makes no mystery of his oligarchic preferences, arguing, for example, that democracy makes free men look like slaves (1.10–11).[41] Part of this argument involves Pseudo-Xenophon seeing liturgies as a way for the people to loot the rich. As he puts it, 'the people decide to receive money by singing, running, dancing, rowing on ships, so that they are remunerated and the rich become poorer' (1.13; cf. 2.10). For Pseudo-Xenophon, institutions such as choregies, gymnasiarchies and trierarchies were solely invented as channels of financial redistribution in a political situation that benefited only one party – either the people or the elite – at the expense of the other.

Theophrastus' Oligarch, while holding several of the same political beliefs as Pseudo-Xenophon's oligarch, presents them with significantly less political nuance. He too rants against corruption in the popular courts (26.4) and liturgies (26.5), but without seeing that these institutions are in a sense justified in a democracy. For Pseudo-Xenophon, 'since it is the people who move the ships and who give the city its power', it is right that they should rule (1.2) – right, in the sense that they should receive some benefits for

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role in Plato's dialogues, and whom Aristotle mentions on several occasions (*De an*. 405b6, *Rh*. 1375b32 and 1416b29).

38 Bultrighini (1999) 35. A good example of Critias' worked-out attack against democracy is his critique of the rule of law (DK B 22 and B 25).

39 Besides Bultrighini, see Pownall (2008) for a commentary on these fragments.

40 Lenfant (2017) preserves the traditional late fifth-century dating. Hornblower (2010) argues that the text replies to Thucydides, on two bases: verbal echoes and a general preoccupation with the justice of the empire, which Hornblower links to the years immediately preceding the foundation of the Second Confederation in 378. The verbal echoes can be sufficiently explained, we take it, by the commonality in topic, and could (despite Hornblower's dismissal) go in the reverse direction. As to the concern with imperialism, it is far from the Old Oligarch's only or even main topic.

41 2.17; 2.20. Hornblower (2011) denies that the author is an oligarch: he rather sees him as 'a very clever democrat', whose every apparent critique could be taken as a compliment for democracy. We find it hard to believe, given the example cited above. Even this practice of not hitting slaves provided masters with material benefits, the idea that free men looked like slaves could only hurt the Athenians' self-perception.

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their paramount contribution.[42] Pseudo-Xenophon also admits that, as long as an office does not require special skills (as generalship, for instance, does), it makes sense for a democracy to make every citizen eligible. In contrast to this outlook, Theophrastus' Oligarch finds no justification in popular claims to rule, claiming that prerogative for himself.

This difference can be ascribed not only to the shift in genre from Pseudo-Xenophon's discursive treatise to Theophrastus' sketches, as a number of sketches show their characters defending their vices.[43] Theophrastus' Oligarch also has a number of flaws that Pseudo-Xenophon actually locates in the people, including ignorance and lack of education (ἀμαθία and ἀπαιδευσία, 1.5; cf. 1.13). His useless interventions in the assembly show that he does not belong to those whom Pseudo-Xenophon wishes to see speak at the tribune, the 'cleverest and best men' (τοὺς δεξιωτάτους καὶ ἄνδρας ἀρίστους, 1.6).

By painting such a critical portrait of the Oligarch, Theophrastus seems to deny that this political tendency can itself be reasonable. A comparison with Plato's portrait of oligarchy in the *Republic* helps to further clarify Theophrastus' possible motivations for presenting oligarchy this way.

1.2.3. Oligarchy as a character trait: Plato's *Republic* and Theophrastus' C.26. Theophrastus knew Plato's *Republic* well, having written an epitome of the whole work (DL 5.43). In its eighth book, Plato describes a succession of regimes (timocracy, oligarchy, democracy, tyranny), sketching their functioning and depicting the people whose soul is analogous to each system of rule. In the case of oligarchy, Plato first explains the functioning of the regime (550c8–553a2, 555b3–557a1) and then paints the psychological portrait of the person who corresponds to it (the so-called 'oligarchic man', described at 553a3–555b2 and called ὀλιγαρχικός at 553e1). But neither of these two descriptions matches Theophrastus' character sketch. The rulers of Plato's oligarchic city are partisans of oligarchy, like Theophrastus' man, but Plato tells us very little about their character. As for the oligarchic man, Plato gives us the details of his character, but he is not a partisan of oligarchy himself. This reveals the originality of Theophrastus' move in C.26: turning political oligarchy into a character trait.

It is generally assumed that Plato's ὀλιγαρχικός is an oligarchic partisan. The assumption relies on the idea that the individual types described in *Republic* 8 live in the corresponding cities and favour their regimes: the oligarchic man in an oligarchy, the

42 In the fourth century as in the fifth, the citizens manned the city's ships, the basis of military power. Here see Cawkwell (1984). Liddel (2007) 285, suggests that citizens were paid: this was also the case in the fifth century, as Pseudo-Xenophon informs us (1.13). The Athenian fleet was still extraordinarily strong in the 320s, due to Lycurgus' reforms, and nothing suggests that a change was made in the way rowers were recruited. Here see Worthington (2021) 20.

43 The Oligarch's lack of reasoning makes him unlike both the Friend of Villains, who defends ill-famed politicians on two counts, either because their case is good, or because they are active and efficient in defending the people (29.5–6); and unlike the Penny Pincher, who tries to convince his wife that small daily loans to their neighbours amount, at the end of the year, to an important sum (10.12–13).

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democratic man in a democracy.[44] Interpreters have recently insisted on the lack of evidence for such a claim: nothing warrants that the two tracks, the individual and the city, are related in this way.[45] In other words, the ὀλιγαρχικός Plato describes does not have to live in an oligarchy, nor is he necessarily a partisan of oligarchy: all we know is that his main psychological drive is the desire to make money (553b7–d7). This latter point is important in clarifying why we should not necessarily expect a similarity between Plato's and Theophrastus' ὀλιγαρχικός. Indeed, Plato's character is not interested in holding office, nor in civic honours in general (553d6; 554e7–555a6), and his outward appearance is 'squalid' (αὐχμηρός, 554a10; cf. αὐχμῶν at C.26.4). By contrast, Theophrastus' Oligarch desires a political role and is anxious about the figure he cuts. If Theophrastus' Oligarch is not similar to Plato's ὀλιγαρχικός, neither is he similar to Plato's portrait of the rulers of the oligarchic city, both because, in their case, we only get a brief glimpse of their character – that they too honour money (550e4–8)[46] – and because Theophrastus' Oligarch is no ruler but a disgruntled citizen living in a well-established democracy.

All this leads us to suggest that Theophrastus, in contrast to Plato, is *characterising* oligarchy and not only with reference to oligarchic rulers. His sketch is a study of the oligarchic personality as it can be found in any citizen. By anchoring oligarchic tendencies to a specific character type, Theophrastus implies that typical oligarchs do not adopt their political stance on the basis of political facts, or circumstances, but project their character onto any given situation.

One might think, however, that Theophrastus' focus on the ordinary oligarch would align him with a third kind of oligarchic man that we find in Plato's *Republic* 8, in the description of democracy's transition to tyranny. In this narrative, a demagogue launches a campaign to redistribute the money hoarded by the rich, who subsequently react by becoming 'truly oligarchs, whether they want to or not' (565c1–2). These oligarchs seem closer to Theophrastus' character, since they are rich citizens living in a democracy who favour an alternative regime. However, in Plato's narrative, they are the targets of a real political campaign against them, whereas any suggestion that democracy threatens the Oligarch is lacking in Theophrastus' sketch. Theophrastus could very well have set the stage for his portrait by describing popular decisions targeting the rich – the Illiberal Man, for instance, leaves the assembly *because* a new tax has just been approved (22.3).[47] The absence of any such context from C.26 is telling: the Oligarch is not speaking in reaction to what is going on around him; he approaches the flow of politics with prejudice and presupposition.[48]

44 For a version of this reading, see Williams (2006).

45 Blössner (1998), Ferrari (2003), Lear (1999).

46 Sikkenga (2002) bases his analysis of book 8's oligarchy on this single piece of information. Nothing rules out Theophrastus' man honouring money as such; but he seems much more sensitive to outward appearance and party solidarity. In any case, his character is much more developed than Plato's oligarchic ruler.

47 See Brun (1983) 168, for the wealthy's perception that such levies threatened their economic and social position.

48 If there is a provocation, it is as minor and insignificant as the badly dressed man coming to sit next to him (26.4).

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This point is crucial for the interpretation of 'The Oligarch' and the *Characters* as a whole, because C.26 is the only explicitly political sketch of the collection. If we take the collection as complete, we observe that there is no sketch of 'The Democrat'.[49] This implies that for Theophrastus, oligarchy seems to be the only political tendency that can be reduced to a character trait. Theophrastus *could* have presented democracy, or 'democratism', in this way.[50] Historically, Theophrastus had ample material to depict radical democrats as characteristic of democracy: as Bayliss has shown, there were many partisans of radical democracy in early Hellenistic Athens who were committed to the idea of extended popular participation – and who therefore might in theory be ripe for ridicule.[51]

Theophrastus' choice to represent the Oligarch as a character type (and to do so by making him an oligarch who is unsuccessful and unreasonable) seems, in this light, to betray a political position – one which highlights how oligarchy is much easier to typify than democracy. The study of the authoritarian personality by Adorno and his colleagues presents a parallel, in its findings that fascism is not a political stance based on an objective consideration of facts, as much as a particular psychology – one in which individuals think and act in more rigid ways than individuals who are pro-democracy.[52] This suggestive material offers one possibility for why Theophrastus did not include a character of 'the Democrat' in the collection: he considered democracy to be less amenable to rigid characterisation, in contrast to oligarchy.[53]

The two driving points in this section – that Theophrastus is representing oligarchy as a political tendency that leads to bad citizenship (in all regimes, including oligarchic ones), and that he is turning oligarchy into a character trait – are related: Theophrastus' Oligarch is inherently a bad citizen, because he is a type. This Oligarch cannot be Aristotle's moderate oligarch, because his views are not based on circumstances, but on the projection of a fixed personality. We are thus left with the question why Theophrastus wanted to sketch his one political character in this way. To answer this, we will have to examine the moment in which this sketch was likely written, as well as the nature of Theophrastus' involvement and interest in politics.

49 Or, for that matter, 'The Monarchist'.

50 As Lane Fox has shown ((1996) 131–2), the Friend of Villains might seem democratic, but in fact 'befriends people who are a bad lot, in a moral sense (...) not in the social sense which the term had for the Old Oligarch in the 420s'. This character, Lane Fox continues, is not 'satirized because of his "popular" politics (...) His constituency really does lie among the morally deficient, not among the poor and under-privileged'. Similarly, while the Loquacious Man defends himself in the language of democracy, as Lane Fox points out, the democracy is not at fault.

51 Bayliss (2011) 53.

52 Adorno *et al.* (1950) 644–52.

53 Plato psychologised all character types because his project differed from that of Theophrastus. Plato thought that the political features of any regime could be reduced to individual psychology, and that individual psychology itself was resolvable in terms of the tripartition he put forward (*Rep.* 544d6–e1). What interested him was the individual's underlying psychological state, in so far as it explained political behaviour. Democracy had to fit into this schema. Theophrastus, by contrast, is not psychologising oligarchy: he is characterising it.

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2. Theophrastus and politics

The question why Theophrastus chooses to depict the Oligarch in the way he does will depend on the difficult issue of the sketch's date – above all, whether it was written during an oligarchy or a democracy.

Diggle's 2004 commentary provides the most recent discussion of the date of the *Characters*, suggesting that composition and publication, individually or as a collection, can run from 322 to 310/9.[54] During these years, Athens underwent dramatic political changes. Before 322, Athens lived under Alexander the Great in a state of democracy. In 322, an oligarchic regime was installed by Phocion and Demades under Macedonian pressure, in which citizenship was restricted to 9000 citizens.[55] This regime was succeeded four years later by a revival of democracy lasting for a year, from 318 to 317. From 317 to 307, an oligarchy was put in place again under Demetrius of Phalerum. Demetrius restricted active citizenship to 21,000 men, and when democracy was restored in 307, his regime was also seen as oligarchic (even if it seems to have been less oligarchic than the rule of Phocion and Demades).[56] After the fall of Demetrius in 307, Athens became a democracy again.[57]

Many of the complexities of dating the *Characters* have rested on the question of the dramatic date of certain characters, including that of 'The Oligarch'. While it is clear, as Diggle and Lane Fox underline, that C.26 is set in a democracy, this could place the dramatic date of the sketch in any one of the democracies outlined above: pre-322, between 318 and 317, or after 307. Diggle discounts the last option for C.26 on the grounds that the liturgies mentioned in this sketch (26.4) were not reinstated under Demetrius.[58] Since the publication of Diggle's commentary, however, our knowledge of Demetrius' regime has been greatly advanced by O'Sullivan, who suggests that it is far from certain that Demetrius did abolish liturgies.[59] If this is the case, C.26 could have been written between 322 and the years after 307.[60]

The political upheavals that characterise this period of Hellenistic Athens were fraught with dangers for philosophers, especially Peripatetics.[61] This situation would have been particularly true for Theophrastus, who was close to the oligarchic rulers.[62] The oligarch

54 Diggle (2004) 27–37. See also Lane Fox (1996) 135.

55 On the view of this regime as oligarchy, see Plut. *Phoc*. 34.3; Diod. Sic. 18.65–6. See also the epigraphic evidence in Gehrke (1976) 95 n. 47, and O'Sullivan (2009) 32 n. 58.

56 Philoch. *FGrH* 328 F66; Strabo 9.1.20; O'Sullivan (2009) ch. 3.

57 For an overall account of the period, see Habicht (1997); Bayliss (2011).

58 Lane Fox (1996) 135; Diggle (2004) 33.

59 O'Sullivan (2009) 168–89.

60 But any argument based on the date of composition or publication of C.26 is bound to remain as fragile, as our evidence is scanty.

61 Think, for example, of Aristotle's flight from Athens in 323. Here see Plut. *Vita Aristotelis Marciana* 41.

62 We do not include Theophrastus' relationship with Cassander (DL 5.37), not only because – as Lane Fox (1996) 133 has noted – there is a tradition preserved by Themistius that indicates hostility (Or. 23.285c), but also because one of the

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Demades was lauded by Theophrastus for being an orator 'superior to his city', whereas Demosthenes was only 'worthy of it'.[63] Theophrastus seems to have similarly admired Phocion. There is a passage from the *Characters* in which the Friend of Villains rails against 'fine people' (χρηστοί) – 'fine' being an adjective often used to describe Phocion, making part of this character's vice his refusal to recognise Phocion's greatness.[64] There is equally evidence to suggest that, perhaps as a result of these connections, democrats became hostile to Theophrastus. Under the restored democracy in 318, Theophrastus was tried for impiety by the fervent democrat Hagnonides of Pergase, who had also prosecuted Phocion.[65] Theophrastus' relation to Demetrius of Phalerum and his regime was even closer. Demetrius was a student of the Lyceum and a friend of Theophrastus.[66] After the fall of Demetrius in 307, Theophrastus had to flee Athens when a law subjected philosophical schools to state control, on the grounds of collusion with Macedon, and as Haake has shown, anti-democratic leanings.[67] The law was soon abrogated and Theophrastus allowed to come back; but the episode must have made him aware, if need be, of the hostility which he could incite.

What, then, should we make of the decision to write a sketch of an oligarch, given this context? Several different options present themselves, in relation to the identity of the ruling party at the time of the text's composition. If the democrats were in power, by ridiculing an oligarch, Theophrastus could reassure them that he was not a supporter of oligarchy but one of its sharpest critics. Given the perception that Theophrastus and his school leaned towards oligarchy, and that it would have been dangerous to be perceived in this light, the critical stance would be wise. There is also evidence to suggest that satirising oligarchy might have been consistent with Theophrastus' own politics at some points. This perspective builds on Lane Fox's sense that while 'we might be tempted to label [Theophrastus] a friend of kings and oligarchs (...) the truth is probably less simple, befitting a life which ran into the eighties and spanned so many political changes'.[68] We have good reason to think that Theophrastus sided with democrats in Eresus to overthrow tyranny in his

other sources for this relationship, Theophrastus' treatise *To Cassander on kingship*, had its authorship called into question in antiquity (Ath. 144e–f).

63 *FHS&G* 706. Brun (2000) 14 does not draw any conclusions from this evidence for Theophrastus' political stance. Dmitriev (2021) 230 unconvincingly suggests an opposite reading ('When examined within a rhetorical context, the reference to Demades's oratory as being "above the city" implied his failure to reflect Athens' real needs and best interests'.).

64 Tritle (1988) 121 n. 159. Another connection might be Phocion's education in the Academy (Gehrke (1976) 2; Tritle (1988) 50–1).

65 On the circumstances and date of the trial, see O'Sullivan (2009) 209–10. Hagnonides was later put to death, very likely under Demetrius of Phalerum (Plut. *Phoc*. 38.1).

66 O'Sullivan (2009) 197–8 and 205. The regime Demetrius established in 317 has often been seen as a reflection of Peripatetic moral and political philosophy – here see Ferguson (1911) – but O'Sullivan (2009) 197–8, 205, has recently warned us against an excessively naive reading of this connection.

67 DL 5.38; Haake (2008) 102.

68 Lane Fox (1996) 133. We acknowledge here, however, that since Lane Fox's arguments about Theophrastus hedging his bets by sending his will to both the democrat Olympiodorus and Adeimantus, the Macedonian agent of Demetrius Poliorcetes, there has been work complicating Olympiodorus' democratic credentials

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native city.[69] Theophrastus' distance towards oligarchy can also be found in *De eligendis magistratibus*. The author thinks, as a commentator put it, that 'a simple property qualification is a poor standard for evaluating prospective magistrates'.[70] Whether Theophrastus' decision to write 'The Oligarch' is strategic or authentic, its purpose could be to reassure democrats that he was not one of their enemies.[71]

If, on the other hand, Phocion and Demades or Demetrius of Phalerum were in power, the particular way in which Theophrastus wrote this sketch would enable him to accomplish two different things at the same time: to disprove common opinion that Demades, Phocion and Demetrius deserved to be seen as oligarchs (the issue was contested, and Theophrastus' point could here be that these politicians were distinct from the Oligarch's narrow-mindedness); and also to warn these leaders against becoming like the Oligarch in the future.

Athens' oligarchs differ markedly from Theophrastus' portrait of them in numerous ways. Demades seems to have known his Homer well, acknowledged the importance of democratic institutions – in particular, mechanisms of redistribution – and likely restricted citizenship only under Macedonian pressure.[72] Phocion also was well educated, fought against oligarchic regimes throughout his military career and tried to prevent Antipater from installing a garrison in Athens.[73] Demetrius of Phalerum similarly was a first-rank Homeric scholar and famed for his political acumen.[74] While Demetrius' instating of laws against luxury can be interpreted a number of ways, it marks a clear difference from both the Oligarch's inept political manoeuvring and his unthinking acceptance of finery.[75]

(at least during Theophrastus' lifetime). On this see Iacoviello (2021). On Adeimantus see Landucci Gattinoni (2001). On Olympiodorus' fraught relation with Demetrius, see Bayliss (2011) 43, 65.

69 Ebner-Landy (2022).

70 Szegedy-Maszak (1981) 102, commenting on ll. 18–28 of the text.

71 Theophrastus' attack on oligarchy becomes more pointed when we realise that at least one of the measures favoured by the Oligarch was implemented between 322 and 318; in 322 the disenfranchised citizens were offered land in Thrace, with the approval of Phocion (Plut. *Phoc.* 29.4).

72 On Demades quoting Homer, see Diod. Sic. 16.87.1–3; Sext. Emp. *Math.* 1.295; Stob. 4.14.47. Dmitriev (2021) 127 casts doubt on the authenticity of what looks indeed like a χρεία; but this does not sit well with Dmitriev's otherwise convincing thesis, that Demades was turned into a paradigmatic example of an ἀπαίδευτος orator in the later rhetorical tradition. On Demades' description of the θεωρικόν as 'the glue of democracy', see Plut. *Mor.* 1011b. On restricted citizenship under Phocion and Demades, see Brun (2000) 116.

73 See Gehrke (1976) 2 and Tritle (1988) 132 for Phocion's education; Gehrke (1976) 46–52 for his military campaigns; Tritle (1988) 130 for his embassy to Antipater. One of Phocion's most famous interventions in the assembly was indeed to exhort the rich to fulfil their fiscal duties: men like Theophrastus' Oligarch would have been among his targets (Plut. *Phoc.* 17.10), discussed by Tritle (1988) 132.

74 For Demetrius and Homer, see Nagy (1996). On how the Athenians considered Demetrius' reign, after the fact, as an oligarchy, see Azoulay (2009). This stands in contrast to Demetrius' own perspective, that he 'rectified democracy' (Strabo 9.1.20).

75 Azoulay (2009) 319–22 reads Demetrius' sumptuary laws as a strategic means for Demetrius to become the only luxurious man, '*seul en scène*', to whom all citizens should direct their admiration. Bayliss thinks it part of a larger plan to keep the poor quiet. See Bayliss (2011) 88.

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Demades, Phocion and Demetrius of Phalerum were quite different, therefore, from Theophrastus' Oligarch. But C.26 indicates the presence, in late fourth-century Athens, of many groups of narrow-minded oligarchic partisans.[76] One danger would be that these oligarchs could unduly influence the rulers in question. In this case, Theophrastus' sketch would be warning these rulers to beware of the overtures of such ridiculous caricatures, and to avoid becoming anything like them.

In each of these scenarios, the sketch of the Oligarch is *doing* something – whether that is reassuring democrats; manifesting authentic views; disproving opinions about current rulers' political positions or warning these rulers how not to behave. Our view about which of these intentions is most plausible depends, as stated above, on its date.

Although the question of dates makes it difficult, on the basis of current evidence, to ascertain the most probable among these four options, taken together they stimulate a fuller consideration of a political aspect of the whole collection. The question then is what role the other twenty-nine characters play.

3. 'The Oligarch' and virtue politics

For the Athenians, a prerequisite for political participation was personal and civic virtue – good judgement, loyalty and identification with the common good, a feature of ancient political theory that Balot calls 'virtue politics'.[77] Although the Oligarch is the only explicitly political character in the collection, several other figures share in the ethical defects that would be thought prejudicial to political cohesion and stability.[78] This encourages us to examine whether in the *Characters*, Theophrastus meant to negatively portray a form of beneficial political participation under different regimes, in a moment of high political instability.[79]

If we take 'The Oligarch' as our starting point, we can start to see a number of what we might call *ethico-political defects* extending across the collection. The first of these is the problem of καιρός. A good politician, for Theophrastus, has to attend to the conditions in which he finds himself: Theophrastus wrote a treatise entitled *Politics in accordance with circumstances* (Πολιτικὰ πρὸς τοὺς καιρούς, 589 4a FHS&G), and fragment B of *De eligendis magistratibus* (l.77) insists on this point.[80] More broadly, respect for the καιρός is for Theophrastus an essential ethical imperative. As Theophrastus characterises it:

76 Lehmann (1997) 30 n. 28; Brun (2000) 128 n. 55.

77 Balot (2009) 284.

78 Political stability has ethical worth for Aristotle, as it ensures that citizens are educated to basic ethical norms – see Bodéüs (1991) 135–46.

79 Here, our proposed political intention would not be at odds with the proposed ethical intention of the *Characters*, a point to which we return in our conclusion.

80 Keaney and Szegedy-Maszak (1976). One should note, however, that the (political) importance of the καιρός was also recognised in Plato's *Statesman* (esp. 307b1–9), the Platonic *Ep.* 7 (326a), by Aristotle (*Eth. Nic.* 1104a8–9) and by Demetrius of Phalerum, who wrote a work Περὶ καιροῦ (DL 5.81).

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> During meetings one man goes through many things and chatters at length, another says little and not even what is essential (τἀναγκαῖα), but a third says only what is necessary and so lays hold upon due measure (τὸν καιρόν).[81]

Καιρός for Theophrastus, as this fragment makes clear, is thought about in terms of quotidian behaviours, pegged to particular character types. The Oligarch fits into the second type: the man who 'says little and not even what is essential'. He thus flouts what for Theophrastus is the elementary rule of ethics and politics: attention to circumstances. The Oligarch is not, however, alone in the *Characters* in his inattention to καιρός. The Importune Man (ἄκαιρος) is indeed defined by this vice, and is specified as not advancing but rather hindering common deliberation by ignoring requirements of the moment (12.9).

Several other flaws that begin with the Oligarch and extend across the collection can be seen as versions of a lack of καιρός. The first of these is a conception of politics that is dangerously rhetorical and based on showmanship and appearance. As we have seen, the Oligarch is an obstacle to, rather than an enabler of public deliberation. Not only does he wish to be rid of the people, and contradict himself, but repeats out-of-place slogans instead of attending to the matter put to the vote. In two other sketches, Theophrastus shows himself to be worried about how the rhetorical use of slogans can obfuscate political reality. The Slanderer hides his vice under a sheen of 'freedom of speech, democracy and liberty' (παρρησίαν καὶ δημοκρατίαν καὶ ἐλευθερίαν, 28.6). The Friend of Villains redescribes whoever is a villain (πονηρόν) as a 'free man' (ἐλεύθερον, 29.4) and claims that by attacking respectable citizens, he is only acting as 'the guard dog of the people' (29.5). In this, the Oligarch is also drawn close to the characters who are men of mere words, like the Babbler, the Talker and the Rumour-Monger – men who, like him, are shown speaking more than acting. This opens up a broader concern with characters who are 'conversational non-cooperators', to borrow Millett's phrase – people who thwart civic speech instead of furthering it.[82] The Babbler speaks nonsense to a man he does not know (3.2–3). The Country Bumpkin only speaks in the assembly to praise garlic, distrusts his close friends and reserves his longer conversations for his labourers (4.2–3). The Talker cannot produce a faithful report of what happened in the assembly, busy as he is telling unrelated stories, including his own rhetorical feats, and constantly disrupting common activities with his untimely interventions (7.7). The Rumour-Monger does not care about spreading false information, if this attracts the attention of his fellow citizens (8.7). And the Arrogant Man 'casts his eyes down' to avoid talking to anyone (24.8),[83] which, just like saying the wrong thing at the wrong political moment, breaks civic bonds, as it prevents the act of deliberation.

81 Fr. 449a *FHS&G*.

82 Millett (2007) 87.

83 In Rusten's (2002) translation.

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The Oligarch's obsession with appearances is mirrored in the other sketches.[84] Just as he puts on a show, adopting a tragic tone (τραγῳδῶν) to deliver his tirades, the Repulsive Man delights in making a show of himself in the theatre (11.3); the Man of Petty Ambition is intent on attracting the attention of his fellow citizens, especially in the assembly (21.11); the Boastful Man narrates how he saved the people during the most recent famine, as well as his other liturgies (23.5–6) and the Late Learner shows off his newly acquired talents to his fellow citizens (27.5–7). Like these types, the Oligarch is mostly concerned with the impression he gives, rather than with the real business of politics.

Another ethico-political defect shared across the *Characters* is the talent for dividing rather than appropriately uniting the polis. We have seen this in the Oligarch's attitude towards the people, whom he disdains and avoids. Other figures in the collection show related flaws. The Talker, for example, both takes the posture of the prominent politician whom the masses do not understand and, like the Oligarch, works to interrupt any communal activity, thus destroying what is κοινόν (7.7).[85] If the Obsequious Man takes the opposite stance, wanting to please not his friends but everyone, this becomes an act that similarly works to prejudice the common. When appointed arbitrator by a relative, the Obsequious Man is shown to curry the opposing party's favour in order to appear impartial (κοινός), and to tell foreigners that their claims are more just than those of his fellow citizens (5.3–4). Whereas the talker destroys the κοινόν, the Obsequious Man stretches it so far that it collapses.[86]

The Oligarch's misconception of the relationship between elite and mass in democratic Athens is another defect shared by other characters in the collection. We have seen that the Oligarch has a narrow view of civic benefaction: he views liturgical duties as one-sided, with the elite as unilateral donors and the people as passive receivers. Here again, he is not alone. Other figures in the *Characters* selfishly compromise the terms of reciprocal exchange: the Shameless Man tries to get a good price from the butcher by reminding him of a service he did him (9.4); the Penny-Pincher measures exactly what each guest drinks and eats at the symposium, to avoid giving more than what is strictly due (10.3; 10.11); the Illiberal Man escapes or fulfils minimally his liturgical obligations (22.3; 22.5); the Arrogant Man never forgets a good turn he has done (24.3) and the Shabby Profiteer, while traveling, refuses to spend any money on public service (30.7). Lane Fox notes that many of the characters in the collection are rich citizens, likely to belong to the liturgical class: this sociological choice might be explained by Theophrastus' desire to emphasise that members of this class should *not* escape the obligations their status involves.[87] Historians have shown that rival conceptions of liturgy existed in Hellenistic Athens: some people

84 On the Oligarch and snobbery, see Pasquali (1919) 58 n. 1; Steinmetz (1960) 296; Stein (1997) 250; Diggle (2004) 463.

85 The Talker disturbs joint activities (trials, symposia, theatrical enjoyment) denoted by the prefix συν. We would like to thank Emma Durand for this observation.

86 See on this point Volt (2007) 134.

87 Lane Fox 1996 133.

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maintained that Athenian liturgists were entitled to expect public honours from their gifts; others emphasised that civic benefaction is not a gift but a duty.[88] Theophrastus himself seems to have endorsed the latter conception: he saw munificence as a duty of the wealthy (*FHS&G* 514) and is said to have practiced it himself (Diog. Laert. 5.37).[89] If he conceded that civic benefactors should be rewarded with certain kinds of honour, Theophrastus was clear that one could not expect the people to be always grateful for what they received: he thought that 'if they have been done a service, they forget immediately' (*FHS&G* 524).[90] The Oligarch is not as wise. He similarly refuses to engage in benefaction (εὐεργεσία) if it does not immediately yield honour (τιμή), and thus refrains from engaging in an activity that holds together the city.[91]

The political turmoil the city experienced in the years Theophrastus was working on the *Characters* must have awakened him to the need to define good citizenship in a new way. Just as political action, for Theophrastus, was predicated upon crises and καιρός, a good citizen should be able to contribute to the common good, whatever the circumstances.[92] The *Characters*, taken as a whole, could then provide the means for readers to learn how to do so: a process of instruction by pleasure, focusing on correcting vices of rhetoric, showmanship, divisive behaviours and non-economic participation on the part of the wealthy and inviting the Athenians to contribute to their city's good in a way attuned to its circumstances.

Where for Balot the role of political virtue is tied to democratic Athens and is to be recovered in the 'corpus of Attic oratory', Theophrastus' *Characters* seems not only to show us a wider extension of virtue politics across different regimes, but also to indicate that a wider range of texts may have participated in upholding this ideology.[93] The *Characters*, in this case, would show us how written literary description was also used to this political effect.

Conclusion

In this article we hoped to offer an interpretation of C.26 that opens up new ways of interpreting the *Characters*. We did so, not by working solely from the method of intertextuality but instead by pairing it with internal commentary, an examination of authorial intention within a given context and comparison across the collection. Through these analyses, we have excavated the presence of a politics in the *Characters*, which we propose should be read as one of the text's purposes – alongside other intentions

88 Ober (1989) 192–247; Gygax (2003) §19; Fisher (2003); Christ (2006) 182–3.

89 See on this point Bodei Giglioni (1980) 85.

90 When asked what holds together the life of men (ἀνθρώπων βίον), he answered, 'benefaction, honour and revenge' (εὐεργεσία καὶ τιμὴ καὶ τιμωρία, *FHS&G* 517).

91 The way in which this draws together the Oligarch's stated opinions with Theophrastus' own, might be considered as further evidence for Theophrastus' use of this sketch to strategically, rather than authentically, align himself with democrats.

92 See the praise of Theramenes in the *Constitution of Athens* (28.5).

93 Balot (2009) 272–3.

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previously identified by scholarship as possible. Our aim is not to discount these intentions, whether they be ethical, rhetorical, comedic or miscellaneous. A text can very well have multiple intentions, as long as they are compatible. Our aim is to add politics to the toolbox that interpreters have used to unlock the enigma of this Hellenistic text.

Seen in this light, the Oligarch is less of a mystery. He is a bad citizen, under a democracy or an oligarchy, because he cannot live with others – neither with the people, nor even with his peers. He is bad at deliberating, does not argue for his views and is full of contradictions. In no regime would he make a valuable contribution. While the Oligarch is unique as the only type characterised by a political vice, the other qualities that we find in this sketch are shared with others. They thus present a full picture of the Athenian bad citizen, broadening Christ's account of this figure.[94] Theophrastus not only gives us a wider array of qualities than Christ outlines (whose focus is on the crafty individual who outsmarts democratic norms and political culture to advance his own interest), but shows us how these qualities threaten all kinds of political regime: not only democracy. Theophrastus' stock figures act on behavioural regularities that cause them to miss the καιρός, which impairs their participation in any regime, as it prevents them from adapting to the situated demands of political virtue.[95]

Lane Fox, in pioneering the idea that the *Characters* can be read as a text for social historians, began his article with a celebrated image of Laslett's, that the historian who tries to use literature as a source looks at the world 'through the wrong end of a telescope'.[96] Our lens here is more like a microscope, pointed towards 'The Oligarch' with the aim of determining its components. But from here, we have been able to zoom out, and in doing so, hope to provide a procedure or method for reading the *Characters* as intellectual historians.

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94 See Christ (2006) 1 on the book's timeframe.

95 On behavioural regularities as character flaws in Theophrastus, see Fortenbaugh (1975).

96 Lane Fox (1996) 127; Laslett (1976).

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