The vogue for writing set “characters” which swept through English court society during the second and third decades of the century caught up, if only momentarily, all sorts of men who had other careers to make. Joseph Hall and John Earle were churchmen who would ultimately become bishops; Sir Thomas Overbury was a politician who lost his life in a shadowy court-intrigue, and thus became a legend. All three were men who found in the “character” an opportunity to display their wit, their style, their worldly knowledge.

Hall, who claimed to be the first English satirist, was also one of the first character-writers. *Characters of Virtues and Vices*, published in 1608, has an obvious moral slant, and the portrait of a “malcontent” may be polemical as well, since the malcontent sounds much like a Puritan. Hall lived long enough to cross polemical swords, inconclusively of course, with the foremost Puritan man of letters, John Milton, who had been born in the very year when Hall’s *Characters* were published.

Sir Thomas Overbury died young, poisoned in the Tower by the mistress of one of James Stuart’s favorites; many rumors and innuendos surrounded the event. Overbury had himself written a few characters in verse and prose; but as a result of the mystery surrounding his death, numerous other “characters,” by an assortment of hands, clustered around his name. The collection was first published in 1614, and was augmented in successive editions for nearly a decade thereafter.

John Earle was probably the most talented man who tried his hand at characters; he was also nearly the last. *Micro-cosmography* aims to present a portrait of the little world, i.e., humankind as a whole. It originally included 54 and ultimately grew to 78 characters. Earle himself, who was a fellow at Oxford when he first published the book (anonymously), went through the civil wars on the royalist side, and rose after the Restoration to be a power in the church. But he was always a quiet, peaceful man, with a little, acid wit, after the model of Hooker, whom he deeply admired.

**JOSEPH HALL: THE MALCONTENT**

He is neither well full nor fasting; and though he abound with complaints, yet nothing dislikes1 him but the present; for what he condemned while it was, once past, he magnifies and strives to recall it out of the jaws of Time. What he hath he sees not, his eyes are so taken up with what he wants; and what he sees he cares not for, because he cares so much for that which is not. When his friend carves him the best morsel, he murmurs that it is a happy feast wherein each one may cut for himself. When a present is sent him, he asks, “Is this all?” and “What, no better?” and so accepts it as if he would have his friend know how much he is bound to him for vouchsafing to receive it. It is hard to entertain him with a proportionable2 gift. If nothing, he cries out of unthankfulness; if little, that he is basely regarded; if much, he exclaims of flattery and expectation of a large requital. Every blessing hath somewhat to disparage and

1. Displeases. 2. Appropriate.
distaste it. Children bring cares, single life is wild and solitary; eminency is envious, retiredness obscure; fasting painful, satiety unwieldy; religion nicely severe, liberty is lawless; wealth burdensome, mediocrity contemptible. Everything faulteth either in too much or too little. This man is ever headstrong and self-willed, neither is he always tied to esteem or pronounce according to reason; some things he must dislike he knows not wherefore, but he likes them not; and otherwhere, rather than not censure, he will accuse a man of virtue. Everything he meddleth with he either findeth imperfect or maketh so; neither is there anything that soundeth so harsh in his ear as the commendation of another, whereto yet perhaps he fashionably and coldly assenteth, but with such an after-clause of exception as doth more than mar his former allowance. And if he list not to give a verbal disgrace, yet he shakes his head and smiles, as if his silence should say, “I could, and will not.” And when himself is praised without excess, he complains that such imperfect kindness hath not done him right. If but an unseasonable shower cross his recreation, he is ready to fall out with heaven, and thinks he is wronged if God will not take his times when to rain, when to shine. He is a slave to envy and loseth flesh with fretting, not so much at his own infelicity, as at others’ good; neither hath he leisure to joy in his own blessings whilst another prospereth. Fain would he see some mutinies, but dare not raise them; and suffers his lawless tongue to walk through the dangerous paths of conceited alterations, but so as in good manners he had rather thrust every man before him when it comes to acting. Nothing but fear keeps him from conspiracies, and no man is more cruel when he is not manacled with danger. He speaks nothing but satires and libels, and lodgeth no guests in his heart but rebels. The inconstant and he agree well in their felicity, which both place in change, but herein they differ: the inconstant man affects that which will be, the mal-content commonly that which was. Finally, he is a querulous cur, whom no horse can pass by without barking at; yea, in the deep silence of night the very moonshine openeth his clamorous mouth; he is the wheel of a well-couched firework that flies out on all sides, not without scorching itself. Every ear was long ago weary of him, and he is now almost weary of himself. Give him but a little respite, and he will die alone, of no other death than others’ welfare.

SIR THOMAS OVERBURY: A Puritan

Is a diseased piece of Apocrypha: bind him to the Bible, and he corrupts the whole text; ignorance, and fat feed are his founders; he nurses, railing, rabies, and round breeches; his life is but a borrowed blast of wind, for between two religions, as between two doors, he is ever whistling. Truly whose child he is, is yet unknown, for willingly his faith allows no father: only thus far his pedi-
gree is found. Bragger, and he flourished about a time first; his fiery zeal keeps him continually costive, which withers him into his own translation, and till he eat a Schoolman, he is hidebound; he ever prays against nonresidents, but is himself the greatest discontinuer, for he never keeps near his text: anything that the law allows, but marriage, and March beer, he murmurs at; what it disallows and holds dangerous, makes him a discipline. Where the gate stands open, he is ever seeking a stile; and where his learning ought to climb, he creeps through; give him advice, you run into traditions, and urge a modest course, he cries out councils. His greatest care is to contemn obedience, his last care to serve God handsomely and cleanly; he is now become so cross a kind of teaching, that should the church enjoin clean shirts, he were lousy; more sense than single prayers is not his, nor more in those than still the same petitions; from which he either fears a learned faith, or doubts God understands not at first hearing. Show him a ring, he runs back like a bear; and hates square dealing as allied to caps; a pair of organs blow him out of the parish and are the only clyster pipes to cool him. Where the meat is best, there he confutes most, for his arguing is but the efficacy of his eating: good bits he holds breed good positions, and the Pope he best concludes against in plum broth. He is often drunk, but not as we are, temporally; nor can his sleep then cure him, for the fumes of his ambition make his very soul reel, and that small beer that should allay him (silence) keeps him more surfeited, and makes his heat break out in private houses; women and lawyers are his best disciples; the one, next fruit, longs for forbidden doctrine, the other to maintain forbidden titles, both which he sows amongst them. Honest he dare not be, for that loves order; yet if he can be brought to ceremony, and made but master of it, he is converted.

SIR THOMAS OVERBURY: WHAT A CHARACTER IS

If I must speak the schoolmaster's language, I will confess that character comes of this infinite mood χαράξει, that signifieth to engrave, or make a deep impression. And for that cause, a letter (as A, B) is called a character.

Those elements which we learn first, leaving a strong seal in our memories. Character is also taken from an Egyptian hieroglyphic, for an impress, or short emblem; in little comprehending much.

To square out a character by our English level, it is a picture (real or personal) quaintly drawn, in various colors, all of them heightened by one shadowing.

5. Puritan hatred of the medieval Schoolmen (all Catholics) naturally was proverbial. There seems to be a whole series of buried jokes in three opening lines on the Puritan as a book “bind him to the Bible,” “his own translation,” and “hidebound” (i.e., bound in leather, but also scrawny meager, and stubborn).
6. Preachers who do not live among their flock; the Puritan also depart from his duty, i.e., “his text.”
7. “Councils” of the church were at odious to Puritans as historical “traditions”—both being ways of adulterating God's pure word with mere human prudence.
8. Puritans were notorious for long, repetitive sermons, but not for logical discourse.
9. The Puritan antipathy to the ceremony of the ring in marriage, compared with a bear's antipathy to the bear ring. “Square dealing” (i.e., honesty) is allied in Puritan eyes to square caps (i.e., learning; from the scholar’s cap).
1. Enema tubes. The organ is added to the list of Puritan hates.
2. Drunk with ambition, as other men get drunk with ale, the Puritan breaks out in private houses as they do in public houses (taverns).
3. After forbidden fruit, women long for forbidden doctrine.
4. The last of Overbury's characters, this is really the character of a character.
It is a quick and soft touch of many strings, all shutting up in one musical close; it is wit’s descant on any plain song.

JOHN EARLE: A PRETENDER TO LEARNING

Is one that would make others more fools than himself; for though he knows nothing, he would not have the world know so much. He conceits nothing in learning but the opinion, which he seeks to purchase without it, though he might with less labor cure his ignorance than hide it. He is indeed a kind of scholar-mounted bank, and his art our delusion. He is tricked out in all the accoutrements of learning, and at the first encounter none passes better. He is oftenest in his study than at his book, and you cannot pleasure him better than to deprehend him. Yet he hears you not till the third knock, and then comes out very angry, as interrupted. You find him in his slippers and a pen in his ear, in which formality he was asleep. His table is spread wide with some classic folio, which is as constant to it as the carpet, and hath laid open in the same page this half year. His candle is always a longer sitter-up than himself, and the boast of his window at midnight. He walks much alone in the posture of meditation, and has a book still before his face in the fields. His pocket is seldom without a Greek Testament or Hebrew Bible, which he opens only in the church, and that when some stander-by looks over. He has his sentences for company, some scatterings of Seneca and Tacitus which are good upon all occasions. If he read anything in the morning, it comes up all at dinner; and as long as that lasts, the discourse is his. He is a great plagiary of tavern-wit; and comes to sermons only that he may talk of Austin. His parcels are the mere scrapings from company, yet he complains at parting what time he has lost. He is wondrously capricious to seem a judgment, and listens with a sour attention to what he understands not. He talks much of Scaliger and Casaubon and the Jesuits, and prefers some unheard-of Dutch name before them all. He has verses to bring in upon these and these hints, and it shall go hard but he will wind in his opportunity. He is critical in a language he cannot construe, and speaks seldom under Arminius in divinity. His business and retirement and caller-away is his study, and he protests no delight to it comparable. He is a great nomen-clator of authors, which he has read in general in the catalogue and in particular in the title, and goes seldom so far as the dedication. He never talks of anything but learning, and learns all from talking. Three encounters with the same men pump him, and then he only puts in or gravely says nothing. He has taken pains to be an ass, though not to be a scholar, and is at length discovered and laughed at.

5. Variations.
6. I.e., “the only thing he values in learning is the reputation of being learned.”
7. I.e., “you cannot please him better than by taking him away from his study.”
8. Not on the floor but on the table—a kind of dust-cloth.
1. St. Augustine; the “pretender” adapts himself to every occasion.
2. Eager to seem a man of judgment and insight.
3. Joseph Justus Scaliger and Isaac Casaubon were great Protestant scholars of the previous age, much opposed by the Jesuit order of the Roman church.
4. Arminius was a 16th-century Dutch theologian whose anti-Calvinist views involved him in many intricate arguments over predestination—an impressive authority.
5. Having picked up authors’ names from catalogues, he studies them at length—and on their title-pages.