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Author(s): Elizabeth C. Evans

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We do it—so did the Greeks and Romans
But they made an organized science of it.

Physiognomics In the Roman Empire

Elizabeth C. Evans

THE STUDY OF PHYSIOGNOMY, or the art of interpreting character from personal appearance, has engaged the interest of many writers in the ancient world, especially in the second century of the Christian Era.¹ But its origins are far older. Pythagoras has been called the "inventor" of the art, though Galen maintains that Hippocrates really established it as a science, and as such it was always closely associated with the science of medicine. Aristotle in his genuine works deals with the subject frequently, and the little book, ascribed to Aristotle, *Φυσιολογικὰ*² is the first systematic treatment of such material that has come down to us. The work may be easily divided into two separate parts, each probably composed by writers in the school of Aristotle or strongly under his influence. The two sections were apparently united at a later date because of the similarity

of their subject matter. At the beginning of the first part is a clear statement of the basis on which the study rests: "Mental character is not independent of or unaffected by bodily processes, but is conditioned by the state of the body; and contrariwise the body is sympathetically influenced by the affections of the soul. There never was an animal with the form of one kind and the mental character of another; the soul and body appropriate to the same kind always go together, and this shows that a specific body involves a specific mental character."³ The work has not come down to us entire; for Polemo of Laodicea knew a fuller version of the two tracts united in a single book, and makes use of both parts. Earlier classical physiognomy was chiefly descriptive; the later mediaeval authors developed the predictive and astrological side.

The Aristotelian manual discusses the methods of studying physiognomy, what each part of the body may reveal as to character, the comparisons to be observed between the physique and nature of the male and the female, and likewise comparisons between men and many animals in the same regard, especially the lion and the panther.

Noses Classified

AN EXAMPLE MAY be cited from the section on noses, where it is stated that bulbous noses belong to persons who are insensitive, swinish; sharp-tipped noses belong to the irascible, those easily provoked, like dogs; rounded, large, obtuse noses to the magnanimous, the lion-like; slender hooked noses to the eagle-like, the noble; but hollow, rounded, and high curved noses indicate the lustful, like barnyard cocks; noses with a

(Our author was born in Little Boar's Head, New Hampshire, and graduated from Radcliffe College in 1926, where she also received her Ph.D. in 1930. From 1930 to 1932 she was a fellow of the American Academy in Rome, whence she returned to start her teaching career at Wheaton College (Massachusetts) in the fall of 1932. In 1942 she joined the faculty of Vassar College.

Miss Evans' interests and teaching lie in the field of classical literature. She has also worked in Roman religion, and a volume on the *Cults of the Sabine Territory* was published by the American Academy in Rome in 1939 as Volume 11 of its "Papers and Monographs." Her doctor's thesis dealing with the ancient physiognomists was published in *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* in 1935 as an article entitled "Descriptions of Personal Appearance in Roman History and Biography." Subsequent studies in this field which Miss Evans has made largely her own have appeared in *TAPA* (see NOTES to this article).

very slight notch belong to the impudent, the crowlike, while snub noses belong to persons of salacious habits who are compared to deer.⁴

In the second century of our era Polemo is a most important figure to consider in this history of ancient physiognomy. He was born about 88 A.D. at Laodicea in Asia Minor and died about 145 A.D. He early went to Smyrna to study rhetoric, which he later took up as his profession, and became the famous orator of that city. He quickly achieved high honors there, and enjoyed the friendship of the Emperor Hadrian during travels in 123 A.D. When Hadrian came to Athens to dedicate the great temple of Olympian Zeus, Polemo delivered the oration of the occasion.⁵ Polemo's interest in physiognomy has as its basis the appearance of the orator while speaking. It is necessary to remember that the *ars rhetorica* of Cicero's day required careful training in *actio* or *pronuntiatio*. Cicero regards the countenance as the image of the mind, and Quintilian likewise. In a good delivery the head should be carried naturally and erect. If it droops, that is a sign of humility; if thrown back, a sign of arrogance; if it is inclined to one side, then one gives the impression of languor; if held stiffly and rigidly, that is the mark of a rude and savage nature.⁶ For Polemo another reason for interest in the field of physiognomy was surely Dio Chrysostom's belief in its principles, for the distinguished rhetor of Bithynia was a teacher of Polemo and likewise enjoyed the devoted patronage of Hadrian. Polemo also was closely associated at one point in his career in Ionia with Timocrates, the philosopher, whom he called the "father of my eloquence." That association undoubtedly had some influence on Polemo's later physiological studies as Timocrates "early devoted himself to the study of writings on medicine and was well versed in the theories of Hippocrates," who, we should remember, was called by Galen the founder of the science of physiognomy.⁷

Only two of Polemo's speeches have survived, though he was considered an outstanding leader in rhetoric of his day. Of his

work on physiognomy, written in Greek, and perhaps his most important work, we have an Arabic translation, a Greek paraphrase, and a later Latin version. One of the marked features of Polemo's handbook is the use of examples chosen to illustrate the theories set forth, drawn from his personal observation of his contemporaries, for the use of such examples suggests a constant practical application of the principles of physiognomy. Beside considering various aspects of ethnological physiognomy, he follows Aristotle in the close parallelism to be observed between men and animals. He likewise could make use of physiognomy for the purpose of praise or attack. His description of the Emperor Hadrian, appears under the topic of the eyes. "For eyes," he says, "that are clear and shining are good, unless other signs corrupt them. Of this type surely are the eyes of the Emperor Hadrian . . . gleaming, moist, keen, large, full of light."⁸

The Angry Man

THOUGH INTEREST in the study of physiognomy was especially common in the second century of the Christian era it appears even before this period, if we may judge from the literary references to the theories of the art. For example, Seneca in the *De Ira* describes the angry man: "But you have only to behold the aspect of those possessed by anger to know that they are insane. For, as the marks of a madman are unmistakable—a bold and threatening mien, a gloomy brow, a fierce expression, a hurried step, restless hands, and altered color, a quick and violent breathing—so likewise are the marks of the angry man; his eyes blaze and sparkle, his whole face is crimson with blood that surges from the lowest depths of his heart, his lips quiver, his teeth are clenched, his hair bristles, and stands on end, his breathing is forced and harsh, his joints crack from writhing, he groans and bellows, bursts into speech with scarcely intelligible words, strikes his hands together continually, and stamps the ground with his feet . . . anger shows itself openly, and appears in the countenance, and the greater it is, the more visibly it boils forth;—

for no violent agitation can take hold of the mind without affecting in some way the countenance."⁹

Likewise in the first century A.D. Pliny the Elder comments on Aristotle's theories of physical signs for determining duration of life. He has little sympathy with such ideas, but because Aristotle wrote on the subject, he feels he must add some remarks about it. He then continues: "Our own writer Trogus (*Pompeius Trogus, the historian*) has in a similar manner set down physiognomy as indicative of the moral disposition; 'A rounded forehead denotes an irascible temper, it seeming as though the swelling anger had left its traces . . . Long eyes are significant of a spiteful, malicious nature . . . Largeness of ears is a sign of loquacity and foolishness.'"¹⁰ Among the Greek authors slightly later, Plutarch, a contemporary of Suetonius, is the outstanding representative of Peripatetic biography in the early second century. In the life of Alexander the Great, Plutarch professes his belief that for both the artist and the writer physical features are significant as signs of the soul.

"Accordingly," writes Plutarch, "just as painters get the likenesses in their portraits from the face and the expression of the eyes, wherein the character shows itself, but make very little account of the other parts of the body, so I must be permitted to devote myself rather to the signs of the soul in men, and by means of these to portray the life of each, leaving to others the descriptions of their great contests."¹¹

Suetonius' Physiognomics

SUETONIUS, ON THE OTHER HAND, is a faithful follower of the Alexandrian tradition in biography. As *Magister Epistularum* from 119 A.D. probably to the year 122 A.D. he was closely associated with Hadrian and his court. Given ready access to the imperial archives he gathered there much of the material presented in the *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, which appeared about 121 A.D.¹²

A regular part of the plan of biography used by Suetonius is the detailed portrait of the emperor. A number of scholars have

worked on the origin of the descriptions of physique in the Latin biographies. Some have sought it in a native Egyptian official method of identification adopted by the Greek conquerors and transmitted to Alexandrian biographers, and through them to Varro and Suetonius. Some have surveyed iconistic portraiture in Greek and Latin literature and have refused to accept the Egyptian origin as the likely explanation, since in their opinion iconistic portraiture belongs to all classical literature, though they recognize the importance of this type of description in Egyptian-Greek legal forms. In this connection the little handbooks on physiognomy deserve the attention of the readers of Suetonius. It is quite clear that Suetonius in his *Lives* did not make constant use of physiognomical terms in his descriptions of personal appearance. Often it is impossible to find exact parallels or precise interpretations in the two handbooks. We must remember that our manuals have not come down to us in this original form. Portrait sculpture undoubtedly contributed to such likenesses in literature and the elaborate descriptions used for purposes of identification in papyri certainly provided, through Alexandrian biographers, another source of interest in the photographic description. Suetonius, we have seen, was employed at Hadrian's court from 119-121 A.D. Just before this period Polemo of Laodicea, a younger contemporary, had been sent on behalf of the city of Smyrna to Rome and shortly afterwards was closely associated with the Emperor Hadrian.¹³ The name of Polemo, if not this famous sophist himself, was surely familiar to Suetonius.

Forehead Inspection

SUETONIUS DESCRIBES HOW the imperial family sought the advice of an inspector of foreheads, to determine the future of the young Britannicus. "During this time they say that a metoposcopus being introduced by Narcissus, the freedman of Claudius, to examine the features of Britannicus, positively affirmed that he would never become emperor, but that Titus, who stood by, would."¹⁴ But other evidence of Suetonius'

interest in physiognomy comes from the fragments of his lost *Περὶ Βλασφημιῶν* of which an epitome has been published. Several terms are defined from a physiognomical point of view, apparently derived from the pseudo-Aristotelian handbook.¹⁵ We may assume that Suetonius, like Polemo, was familiar with the fuller version of the Peripatetic manual on physiognomy. No direct evidence that Suetonius had read Polemo's handbook can be given. Yet the striking parallelisms between the ideas of Suetonius and the pseudo-Aristotelian manual and of Polemo are of considerable significance. I believe that we may fairly conclude that Suetonius, though he does not alter the actual portrait of an emperor, manages to emphasize certain aspects of the physique which the physiognomists would consider indicative of either the virtuous or vicious nature of an emperor's character. For example, Suetonius often uses phrases relating to the good proportions of the human body as when he describes Tiberius as "broad in the shoulders and chest, and proportionable in the rest of his frame,"¹⁶ or Augustus: "His stature was but low, but Julius Marathus, his freedman, says that he was five feet and nine inches in height. This, however, was so much concealed by the just proportions of his limbs, that it was perceivable only upon comparison with some taller person standing by him."

Importance of Proportion

THE PHYSIOGNOMISTS ATTRIBUTE the greatest importance to right proportions in the human body. The lion clearly represents the most perfect male type, and is thus endowed with a well proportioned body, and in character is generous and liberal, and proud, at the same time gentle and just and affectionate. The panther, on the other hand, is more closely akin to the feminine type, but has its whole body ill articulated and badly proportioned. In character it is mean and thievish and deceitful.¹⁷

In the detailed portraits of the emperors themselves, Augustus as described by Suetonius can be associated with the lion.¹⁸ Augustus, Suetonius says, possessed (1) eyes

that were bright and piercing in which Augustus wished it believed there was a certain divine vigor, (2) hair a little curly, (3) and inclined to a yellow color, and (4) stature which was low but this was concealed by the good proportions of his limbs.

The lion, according to the pseudo-Aristotelian manual, possessed (1) gleaming eyes, (2) a neck of due length with a tawny mane on it which is not (3) too closely curled and (4) a body well knit, neither stiff or too soft and of moderate stature. In Polemo the man devoted to the liberal arts is closely akin in form to a lion: he is of moderate stature, very straight, of fair complexion tinged with red, his hair verging on yellow, not too curly, his eyes moist and shining and filled with joy. Suetonius tells us that Augustus as a very young man devoted himself with great diligence to the study of eloquence and other liberal arts. In other aspects of the physical appearance of Augustus, Suetonius likewise seems to regard the Emperor's character as excellent. He had eyebrows that meet, a sign of beauty, moderate sized ears, which according to the physiognomists are a mark of good character, great vigilance and strength in the performance of duty, as is likewise a complexion between brown and fair which is indicative of intelligence, and an aquiline nose, which reveals a great-souled nature. Similarly Suetonius' analysis of the Emperor's life and character is in general favorable.¹⁹

Caligula's Physiognomy

IF WE WERE TO TURN to Caligula, again a striking parallelism between Suetonius and the physiognomists occurs in the estimate of the Emperor's weaknesses, for his physical appearance is especially to be associated with the very disagreeable features of the panther and the goat.²⁰ Or if we were to study Tiberius, from a physiognomical point of view his physical merits and defects correspond to the virtues and vices of his character.²¹ He was large and strong of frame, a sign of courage, well proportioned, above average in stature, which marks a man excellent in the performance of duty, and shows a just nature. He was broad of shoulders and chest, the characteris-

tic of a robust and courageous man. Suetonius records that he carried on military campaigns with efficiency and success, he used his power for the public good, and Augustus weighing his vices and virtues believed that the latter preponderated. On the other hand, he was of pale complexion, which shows a tendency to fear, his eyes were unusually large, which indicates laziness, but they were at the same time very keen, a sign of injustice. He walked with his neck stiff and bent, a mark of haughtiness, while his countenance was stern with a cloudy brow, which suggests strong willfulness as in the lion and the bull as well as a morose disposition and perfidy. The fact that he rarely talked with his companions, and remained mostly silent supported this appraisal of his disposition. While Suetonius praises him for many excellencies in his younger years, his account of the end of the Emperor's career is a bitter attack.²² It became evident, he says, from many indications in how much fear as well as hate he lived, and his cruel and sullen nature showed up even when he was still a boy.

Galen's Medical Interest

IN CONTRAST TO Suetonius' practical application of physiognomical tenets to the portraits of the Roman emperors is Galen's interest in the subject from a medical point of view. The basis of his approach lies in the doctrine of the four humours. He points out that the physiognomists are prone to define the character of a man from his outward appearance.²³ They say a man has a chest like a lion and is consequently spirited, but legs like a goat, and is therefore lascivious. They describe what they have seen, but in his opinion they omit the reasons for such characteristics.

Polemo's handbook, for example, forms a practical guide to the recognition of certain types of men, but does not suggest the reasons why these characteristics occur. With Galen, however, we find a definite attempt to relate the outward appearance of a man to his character, and to determine the connexions between the humours of the body and the temperament. The distinguished physician of the second century may well have become

familiar with Polemo's manual during his training in medicine at Smyrna. Though he does not refer specifically to the manual he does cite Polemo by name and refers in his writings to the *φυσιογνωμοδυντες* the active practitioners in the field of which Polemo was the leading figure in the first half of the century. Galen's residence in Pergamum, and his later work in Rome belongs in the second half of that same century, and his death is placed around 200 A.D. The doctrine of the humours owes its origin to Alcmaeon of Croton of the Pythagorean School, but it was taken over by Hippocrates and worked out in detail by Galen. Thus the concept gradually evolved of four fluids circulating in the body, which maintained the proper mixture or balance of health in the human beings. The theory was based on the older idea of the four elements, earth, air, fire and water, but, since the solid tissues of the body remained fixed, it was in the fluids, blood, which was hot and moist, phlegm, which was cold and moist, black bile, which was cold and dry, and yellow bile, which was warm and dry, that the proper *krisis* was produced in the body.

Doctrine of Humours

THE FOUR HUMOURS circulating freely affected the human temperament and in turn the outward appearance of the individual. One of Galen's writings on the subject, which may be called a small handbook on the theories of the physiognomists, deals with the theme that the faculties of the mind follow the mixtures of the body.²⁴ The discussion draws widely on many sources. Galen assures us that he has frequently observed that the powers of the mind are closely connected with the humours of the body. This opinion was not his own, but that of many teachers and philosophers, including Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics, whom he cites freely. He quotes Aristotle extensively on the nature of the blood and then takes over directly from Aristotle's *Historia Animalium* certain specific physiognomical signs based on parallelisms with animals. Following this discussion he turns to the field of ethnological physiognomy, where as a devoted follower of his master,

"the divine Hippocrates," he treats at length the influence of physical environment on health, disease, and temperament, a discussion largely based on the Hippocratic essay *Airs, Waters and Places*. This little work of Galen offers his most significant ideas in the study of physiognomy, his belief in the doctrine of the humours, his faith in the essential parallelism in the nature and physique of men and animals, his study of ethnic physiognomy, his strong conviction, Aristotelian in origin, that the best tempered or blended person is one who is halfway between extremes in thinness and fatness, softness and hardness, warmth and cold. Thus by these means he goes far beyond the practising physiognomists of the second century in his ultimate concept of the relation of man to his environment and the effect of that environment on man's appearance and character.

NOTES

¹ This general paper is based directly on three earlier studies: "Descriptions of Personal Appearance in Roman History and Biography," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 46 (1935) 43-84; "The Study of Physiognomy in the Second Century A.D.," *TAPA*, 72 (1941) 96-108; "Galen the Physician as Physiognomist," *TAPA*, 76 (1945) 287-298.

² Ed. by R. Förster, *Scriptores Physiognomonici* (Leipzig, 1893).

³ 805a. (trans. T. Loveday and E. S. Forster).

⁴ 811a.

⁵ See *HSCP* (cited in n. 1), 49-51.

⁶ *Inst. Or.* 11. 3, 65 ff. (after H. E. Butler).

⁷ *TAPA*, 72 (1941) 100. (trans. W. C. Wright).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 97-98. For the text of Polemo's handbook see Förster, *Scriptores Physiognomonici*, cited above.

⁹ 1.1, 3 ff. (trans. J. W. Basore).

¹⁰ *N.H.* 11. 274 (cf. *Arist. Hist. Anim.* 1. 9, p. 491b). Trans. J. Bostock and H. T. Riley.

¹¹ 1. 3. (trans. B. Perrin).

¹² *HSCP.*, 60-61.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Tit.* 2. (trans. A. Thomson and T. Forester).

¹⁵ *HSCP.*, 62.

¹⁶ *Tib.* 68; *Aug.* 79. (trans. Thomson and Forester).

¹⁷ *Pseudo-Arist.* 809b-810a.

¹⁸ *HSCP.*, 65-67; *Aug.* 79.

¹⁹ *Aug.* 21, 33, 51, 66, 67, 72.

²⁰ *HSCP.*, 67-68; *Calig.* 50.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 68-70; *Tib.* 68.

²² *Tib.* 57, 59, 61, 63, 66, 69.

²³ *Mixt.* 2, 6 (Ed. Kühn), 624.

²⁴ Γαλήνου βιβλίον ὅτι ταῖς τοῦ σώματος κράσεσιν τῆς ψυχῆς δυνάμεις ἐπονται.

Ed. by I. Miller in *Scripta Minora* of Galen (Leipzig, 1891). See *TAPA*. 76 (1945) 294-298.

†Edwin L. Findley

One of the country's great teachers, Edwin L. Findley, passed away at his home in Cleveland last fall at the age of 79. Generations of high-school students knew him genially as "Ed Findley"; he had served not only as a classroom teacher, but also as principal of two high-schools, East and South.

Ed Findley was one of the last of the scholar-teachers in the older tradition whose training qualified them to teach equally well on the high-school or college level. He had taken his M.A. at Johns Hopkins; he had been a student of Gildersleeve. He wore his learning lightly, but it was always present; and his students were given all that they could assimilate from a full mastery of the two classical languages and their grammar.

A distinguished citizen of the community, an active worker in good causes, Ed Findley needed no formal philosophy to remind him of the unity of school and society. In addition to many civic organizations, Mr. Findley was always active in classical organizations. In 1937-38 he served as president of the Ohio Classical Conference.

Like all good teachers, Ed Findley will be remembered with gratitude and affection—gratitude for the larger lesson, affection for the man. As a teacher Ed was also a personal friend of his students, eager to help them learn. And help them he did with a kindly personality, full of fun, good-humored teasing, a vast fund of humorous stories—and a great reverence for learning and the *right things*. Ed was one who gladly taught. And many are glad that he did.

N.J.D.

In May

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