

Physiognomy and Visual Judgment in Medieval and Early Modern Europe

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If our faces were not similar, we could not distinguish man from beast: if they were not dissimilar, we could not distinguish man from man.

—Michel de Montaigne, “Of Experience”

From the earliest days of civilization, the face has been an object of fascination, its features and expressiveness a source both of mystery and of communication. As a font of communication, the face, many in antiquity claimed, embodied in its various aspects—the shape and size of the ears and the eyes, for example, or in the disposition of the eyebrows, or perhaps most especially in more transient states such as moments of blushing or growing pale—information about the underlying character, thoughts, and emotions of an individual. And it was on the basis of these claims that the ancients first elaborated what they came to call “physiognomy,” a science that would be transmitted to readers in the late Middle Ages, especially through the *Physiognomonica*, a treatise that, until the mid-nineteenth century, scholars and commentators generally attributed to Aristotle.

The *Physiognomonica*, a relatively short work, offered a catalogue of different corporal characteristics and how they pointed to fundamental character traits such as anger, courage, or gluttony. But, notably, the text insisted that “soul and body . . . are affected sympathetically by one another: on the one hand, an alteration in the state of the soul produces an alteration in the state of the body, and contrariwise an alteration in bodily form produces an alteration of the soul.”¹ This key insight rendered the *Physiognomonica* a work of particular intellectual excitement in universities where,

over the course of the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries, scholars in a variety of fields developed a modern, learned “science of physiognomy.” Medical doctors developed many of their diagnostic theories based on the notion that body and soul were deeply interconnected. So too did astrologers, who made use of it to predict the future. This science, in short, played a central role in what we might call “the long Renaissance.” And as the articles in this special issue show—shedding light onto an aspect that has been largely neglected by scholarship up to now—this was also the case for jurists. In fact, jurists and judges turned to physiognomy as a form of knowledge that might help them determine whether a suspect was guilty or innocent. Indeed, in the late Middle Ages and throughout the early modern period, the science of physiognomy was defined as an act of judgment (“iudicium physiognomicum”). As we will see, it played a crucial role also in criminal courts.

Yet it was in the sixteenth century that the science of physiognomy began to permeate many aspects of European high culture, shaping what the Italian historian Tommaso Casini has called the *mentalità fisiognomica* or the “physiognomic mentality.”² Crucially, its appeal was not based on its universal acceptance as a legitimate and certain means of understanding a person’s character or thoughts. Indeed, there had already been hesitations on this front in antiquity. As Cicero reminded his readers in both his *Tusculan Disputations* (4.80) and his *On Fate* (10–11), the physiognomist Zopyrus had badly misjudged Socrates, attributing to him vices on the basis of his appearance—vices that, as Socrates had explained, he had overcome through his use of reason and the will. The lesson that appearance and character did not always correspond was frequently repeated in the Renaissance. Reflecting on the examples of Socrates, for instance, the great early sixteenth-century humanist Desiderius Erasmus reminded his readers in his *Adages* of the ease with which an individual’s physical appearance could be at odds with his character. In his discussion of the meaning of the Greek proverb “the Sileni of Alcibiades,” Erasmus famously explains that in antiquity the Sileni had been small statues that, divided in the middle, could be opened so that their interiors could be seen.³ Today we might compare them to Russian dolls. But Erasmus’s point was that the ridiculous exteriors of these statuettes often concealed a divine figure within. In Plato’s *Symposium*, the Greek statesman Alcibiades had compared Socrates to these Sileni. For, like them, Socrates’s appearance was not promising, but, on his inside, Socrates was a wise, virtuous individual.

Despite these cautions about how misleading external appearance

could be, many late medieval and Renaissance scholars nonetheless found the science of physiognomy compelling. It was not, as the articles in this volume make clear, that they believed that one could necessarily or with certainty know the nature or character of a particular individual only on the basis of his or her external appearance. But physiognomy, they believed, did provide many clues on this front, at least in the majority of cases. Accordingly, facing the inevitable uncertainties of life, they turned to it to help diagnose diseases, to foretell the future, and even to investigate crimes. Yet, in this period, physiognomy was not merely a scientific practice. It was also a perspective that did much to inform the arts and literature of this period. Indeed, late medieval and Renaissance arts were often shaped by the complex interplay of appearance and reality; and writers as diverse as Chaucer and Shakespeare drew on physiognomy to offer textured portraits of their characters. The sixteenth-century French humanist Michel de Montaigne, preoccupied with offering a frank portrait of himself, even devoted one of his essays to the subject of physiognomy.⁴ And visual artists too—from Leonardo da Vinci and Albrecht Dürer all the way down to Francisco Goya—also turned to physiognomy to help them offer more psychologically complex representations of various figures, real and imagined. Accordingly, it is clear that physiognomy—whether it was accepted or not—played a central role in the imagination of the Renaissance, as scholars, jurists, medical doctors, poets, and artists explored the complex relationship between appearance and reality, and, in particular, the often elusive nature of an individual’s character. Appearance was, that is, both *a sign* and *not a sign* of character.

Yet, despite these tensions and uncertainties, which constituted integral parts of the academic debates on the scientific status of physiognomy, the learned academic “science of physiognomy” seemed to many in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance to offer an avenue for the reading of the faces and bodies of individuals. Physiognomy was, in the eyes of many learned physicians, astrologers, and jurists, a promising hermeneutic. In part, it was viewed as powerful because no less an authority than Aristotle was believed to have written the key text on this subject. But by no means did late medieval and Renaissance scholars merely accept these ideas because of his stature. To the contrary, from the very first commentaries on the *Physiognomonica*, philosophers probed and elaborated this science. This was certainly the cases with jurists, the profession whose engagement with this science is at the center of this volume. As the essays show, the ways in which judges made use of physiognomy was rarely simplistic or straightforward. To the contrary, conscious of the need to preserve freedom of the will, they

grappled with the question of whether physiognomy determined behavior. In the end they tended to use it as supplementary art. But even here their approaches varied.

What is perhaps most striking is the fact that jurists and experts of physiognomy in the late Middle Ages and the long Renaissance made a key distinction between those aspects of physical appearance (the shape of the eyes or the nose, for example) that were fixed and those that were transitory (blushing, trembling, turning pale), thus elaborating on a distinction that had first characterized the definition of the physiognomic signs in Aristotle's *Physiognomonica*. Indeed, this distinction would play a central role in debates from the fourteenth to the eighteenth century. And, in general, it was transitory signs that jurists and physiognomists dealing with criminal cases found the most meaningful, as these pointed to a changing emotional state in the person being examined. In his *On the Use of Rhetoric and Dialectic in Criminal Cases*, the Italian jurist Francesco Casoni, as John Martin's essay shows, distinguished between what he called *signa naturae* and *signa conscientiae*. *Signa naturae* were fixed, and indeed Casoni did believe that they could provide the judge with some meaningful information. But *signa conscientiae*, evident in moments in which a suspect grows pale, or blushes, or trembles, were more powerful, as they were often believed to point to a guilty conscience and thus a high probability that the suspect was guilty. Similar distinctions also informed the many works on metoposcopy (the art of reading foreheads) that were published in the early modern period in the wake of Girolamo Cardano's *Metoposcopia*, composed in 1558. Like palmistry, metoposcopy, as Armando Maggi demonstrates in his fascinating essay, not only enabled the reader to interpret wrinkles, moles, and scars on the forehead for clues about an individual's character but also to divine and foretell the future. Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries metoposcopic treatises would continue to keep an interest in physiognomy alive, along with the distinction of fixed and transient states. As Johan Caspar Lavater's *Essai sur la physiognomie* of 1781 would make clear, this distinction would endure throughout the early modern period, though Lavater now used a Cartesian term *pathognomy* to indicate the expressive qualities of a face as opposed to *physiognomy*, which he used to point to the face's fixed qualities. In short, what is clear from this recurrent effort to differentiate between fixed and changing aspects of the face is that the physiognomy of the late medieval and early modern period not only was based, in general, on a theory of fixed physical features but also included a far more sophisticated psychological theory of the physical manifestations of the emotions.

Jurists and judges began to apply these more philosophical insights to criminal proceedings as early as the fourteenth century. In the fourteenth century, for example, the jurist Baldus de Ubaldis noted that a suspect with *mala phinosomia* (a bad physiognomy) was more likely to be tortured than a person with a *bona phinosomia* (a good physiognomy), because a bad physiognomy generated the presumption that the suspect was more inclined to crime. Both Baldus and his slightly older contemporary Bartolus of Sassoferrato emphasized that such transitory signs as trembling and pallor could indicate that a suspect was lying.

By the sixteenth century, such physiognomic reasoning was present in jurists and judges as diverse as Francesco Casoni and Giovanni Ingegneri. Casoni, drawing on Baldus, explicitly addressed in his *De indiciis* of 1557 the value and limits of physiognomy in the collection of evidence in a criminal trial, while toward the end of the sixteenth century, Ingegneri offered in his *Fisionomia naturale*, as Manuela Bragagnolo shows in her essay, a far more articulated interpretation of the ways in which a judge could read the body of the accused. What is impressive about both Casoni and Ingegneri is that neither one of them was ever reductive. They both recognized that the external appearance of an individual could be misleading. Indeed, in this very same century, both jurists and theologians devoted considerable attention to the question of what could be believed, what was credible. And, indeed, both these professional groups developed nuanced theories about what was sufficient in a confusing world in which truth itself was often elusive. While jurists at first tended to put an emphasis on the *fides* or reliability of witnesses, and theologians had privileged obedience and trust, both groups eventually recognized that there was a convergence between the two. Their theorizing of *credulitas* enabled them, as Stefania Tutino shows in her contribution, to develop a theory in which they did not need to have absolute truth.

Indeed, this sense of opacity spilled over into the courtroom and into criminal investigations. This was perhaps particularly evident in witchcraft trials, as Laura Kounine makes clear in her article, in which concrete evidence for the crime of witchcraft was more often than not unavailable to the judges. Since they understood that the truth of witchcraft charges was often elusive, judges had to be especially scrupulous in exploring the signs of the body. They gave special attention, for example, to whether a person who was accused of witchcraft shed tears. But the tears had to be heartfelt, as tears were seen to be a sign of a good heart. And here physiognomy was closely related to the study of emotions. Was the individual sufficiently compassionate toward her neighbors or sufficiently repentant? On these lat-

ter fronts, the failure to shed tears was a sign of an evil nature and could result in a conviction for witchcraft. But the study of the body extended beyond the courtroom itself to the scene of the crime, as Katherine Dauge-Roth demonstrates in her contribution on homicide crimes in seventeenth-century France. There, judges frequently allied themselves with surgeons who demonstrated enormous talent and ingenuity in reading the bodies of murder victims, providing the court with crucial information about the time and cause of death. Thus, in France the field of forensic medicine was emerging, just as it was in Italy in these same years through the studies of Paolo Zacchia.

Finally, as Felipe Pereda makes clear in his essay on Francisco Goya, physiognomy continued to play a significant role even in the late eighteenth century. The major Enlightenment figure who developed physiognomic theories was Johann Caspar Lavater, and Goya turned to his works in his art—in both his painting and his drawings—to develop an impressively complex theory of portraiture. Thus, the fascination with physiognomy that Bragagnolo has identified in the sixteenth century in the works of such figures as Dürer would continue to inform the arts throughout the early modern period as well. Artists, like judges, found physiognomy an important field to think with in their efforts to explore the psychology of those they portrayed.

Ultimately, as the essays in this volume make clear, the science of physiognomy was indeed a central way of understanding both the psychology and character of individuals in the culture of the long Renaissance. But it was a science with two faces. On the one hand, it offered nothing less than a hermeneutic upon which judges and medical doctors could rely in their study of suspects and patients. On the other, it served as a way of thinking that helped artists and writers explore the complex question of the relation of what they viewed as the exterior self to the internal. Physiognomy, in short, served both as a “science” and, at the same time, the exact opposite of a science, in so far as many—especially artists, playwrights, poets, and essayists—remained convinced that appearance and reality were often at odds; and they used this wisdom to fashion characters and figures that they sought to portray in their art. Famously, Shakespeare’s brilliant portrayal of Hamlet in act 1, scene 2 of the play depends on precisely this disconnect between appearance and reality. “’Tis not . . . the dejected ’havior of the visage / Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief / That can denote me truly,” Hamlet tells his mother, adding a caution: “These indeed seem, / For they are actions that a man might play; / But I have that within which passeth show; / These

but the trappings and the suits of woe.” Then as now, the face both revealed and concealed character and emotions. The question of whether or not it was possible to read the face effectively was a continuous source of discussion and debate throughout the Renaissance and beyond.



Notes

- 1 Ps.-Aristotle, *Physiognomics*, trans. T. Loveday and E. S. Forster in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. J. Barnes (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), 808b 11–14.
- 2 Tommaso Casini, *Ritratti parlanti: Collezionismo e biografie illustrate nei secoli XVI e XVII* (Firenze: Edifir, 2004), 137.
- 3 Erasmus, “The Sileni of Alcibiades,” trans. R. A. B. Mynors, in *The Collected Works of Erasmus*, 86 vols. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 34:262–82.
- 4 Michel de Montaigne, “Of Physiognomy,” in *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1958), 792–814.