

“Ugly and lacking in proportion”:

Ancient Physiognomic Thought from Plato’s *Sophist* to Adamantius the Sophist

In his late work, the *Sophist*, Plato address many themes prominent in his other dialogues: appearance versus reality, the nature of the soul, and, most importantly, the various roles people are expected to play in their lives. Near the beginning of the *Sophist* (d10), the Eleatic Visitor comments on external manifestations of an individual’s soul and psychology by claiming, “So we have to count a foolish soul as one that is ugly and lacking in proportion.” (Plato 2015, 117) This line and the preceding and subsequent discussion touches on the ancient science of physiognomy, the interpretation of external appearances to determine an individual’s psychological makeup.

Like many of Plato’s dialogues, physiognomic texts implicitly address appearance versus reality and the nature of the soul. The earliest extant Western text on physiognomy is the pseudo-Aristotelian text, *Physiognomica*, from the 4th century B.C.E. This text would become the foundation for later physiognomic texts written during the Second Sophistic and beyond. The sophist, Polemo of Laodicea (90-144 AD), imitated and paraphrased the pseudo-Aristotelian text, and Adamantius the Sophist would rework Polemo’s text to create his own physiognomy in the 4th century C.E. Polemo’s text survives only in an Arabic translation.

Sophism in the ancient world had a bad reputation. Through the *Sophist*’s mouthpiece, the Eleatic Stranger, Plato’s *Sophist* addresses this reputation by seeking a proper definition of sophists, whom many considered to be merely teachers of rhetoric, hired guns whose only interest was self-promotion and self-aggrandizement. This was particularly true during the Second Sophistic. As Tim Whitmarsh (2005) notes, modern scholarship tends to see in the Second Sophistic a “supposed intensification of interest in the self (the inner, private person).”

(Whitmarsh 2005, 2) Building on Whitmarsh's idea of "supposed intensification," this paper will argue that ancient physiognomic thinking was more focused on surface meaning than on any kind of interior life.

As many critics have noted, accounts of Socrates' allegedly unattractive physical appearance conflicted with one of the key tenets of physiognomy, that an attractive appearance reflects a good soul, and an unattractive appearance betrays a bad one. Xenophon recounts that Socrates was so unattractive that he resembled a Greek satyr, and in the *Symposium*, Alcibiades praises Socrates despite his ugliness. (Berland 1993, 256) Perhaps this is why Plato uncharacteristically chose to place the Eleatic Stranger at the center of the *Sophist* instead of Socrates.

Building on the work of Whitmarsh, G. W. Bowersock, and Graham Anderson, this essay will trace the intellectual genealogy of physiognomy from Plato's *Sophist* through Adamantius' work on the subject. (Bowersock 1969; Whitmarsh 2005; Anderson 2005) The intertextuality of the texts under consideration—those by Plato, pseudo-Aristotle, Polemon, and Adamantius—demonstrates a consistent epistemology of physiognomy that paradoxically becomes redefined based on intellectual trends contemporary to the authors of these physiognomic texts. This makes physiognomy a cultural and intellectual barometer through which we can better understand the milieu of authors who borrowed from, repurposed, reinvented, or paraphrased from previous writers. As Maud Gleason notes, the Second Sophistic has been "reviled for derivative literature and moral decay." (Gleason 1995, xviii) While Gleason's comments may accurately reflect the reception of Second Sophistic thought, situating physiognomy in its Second Sophistic context uncovers the enduring prevalence of this ancient science that has persisted into the twentieth century.

Bibliography

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