

Physiognomy in Terence's Plays and in the Vatican Terence Illustrations

The ancient science of physiognomy has seen considerable scholarly interest recently. A collection of essays that explores the relationship between ancient physiognomy and ekphrasis (Johnson and Stavru, 2019) includes essays on the use of physiognomy in ancient texts from Mesopotamia and India, the Mediterranean, and the Near East. As this collection illustrates, physiognomy is an inherent human desire to understand the Other. The earliest Western text dedicated to physiognomy is the *Physiognomica*, which was once attributed to Aristotle but is now considered a part of the Aristotelian corpus that was likely written by his students. Two Greek texts (Polemon and Adamantius) largely reworked pseudo-Aristotle's *Physiognomica*, as did Anonymous Latinus' *Book of Physiognomy* in the fourth century. Until Michael Scot's *Liber physiognomie* appeared in thirteenth century, the pseudo-Aristotle text was the earliest Western authority on the subject. Ancient Latin writers, including Seneca, Suetonius, and Apuleius, used physiognomy frequently. However, prose writers in ancient Rome were not the only writers to incorporate physiognomy, as dramatists used the science to characterize the actors in their plays. Terence is a case in point. Terence's six extant plays invite physiognomic readings, as throughout his six plays, dialogue refers to faces and facial expressions. While this may be an attempt to build acting instructions into dialogue, the frequency of references to faces in Terence's plays is staggering. Furthermore, it is likely that actors performing Terence's plays wore masks, which suggests that dialogue referring to faces was necessary for the audience members to understand the drama they were watching. Physiognomy followed Terence's plays in the Byzantine period as well. Codex Vaticanus Latinus 3868, commonly known as the Terentius Vaticanus, is a 9th century illuminated manuscript that illustrates each of Terence's six

plays in addition to providing an illustration of Terence himself. The plays are preceded by an *aquila*, a shelf of masks corresponding to characters in the plays. In this essay, I explore the use of physiognomy in Terence's plays and in the Vatican Terence manuscript to illustrate the enduring nature of physiognomy as it travels across time periods from page to stage to illustration.

Bibliography

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