

Physiognomic Disability in Literary, Statuarial, and Numismatic Depictions of Claudius

Physiognomy, the ancient pseudo-science of reading an individual's outer appearance as a manifestation of their personality and psychological makeup, has garnered significant attention by scholars and critics, with several studies exploring physiognomy's prevalence in the ancient world. Tamsyn Barton (1994) argues that physiognomy should be central to any study of ancient science, and David Rohrbacher (2010) convincingly demonstrates that Roman biographers wrote for an audience they assumed familiar with physiognomic theory. Studies have also demonstrated that physiognomy was also an integral part of the Judeo-Christian intellectual tradition. For example, Mladen Popović (2007) comparatively traces physiognomic theory from ancient Jewish traditions through the Hellenistic period, and Chard Hartstock (2008) focuses specifically on the New Testament's treatment of blindness to argue that physiognomy is both programmatic and problematic in the Luke-Acts. Building on the work of Popović and Hartstock, Mikeal Parsons (2011) argues that Luke characterizes people physiognomically in order to subvert them, while more recently Callie Callon (2019) has argued that physiognomy was used by early Christians as means of persuasion. Physiognomy, therefore, was an integral part of ancient psychological theory in both the pagan world and in Judaism and early Christianity.

Only four texts on physiognomy have survived from antiquity, but a recent collection edited by Simon Swain (2007) provides English translations of Arabic versions of texts by ancient physiognomers Polemon and Adamantius. Combined with the pseudo-Aristotelian text, *Physiognomica*, the corpus of ancient texts of physiognomy provide a small but relatively vivid glimpse into this ancient pseudo-science.

In this essay I argue that Roman Emperor, Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, has been subject to characterization based on physiognomic theories from the earliest depictions in ancient literary texts, statuary, and numismatics to Robert Graves' two-volume fictionalized depiction and Derek Jacobi's famous depiction in the BBC miniseries based on Graves' books. Unlike other physiognomic characterizations of Roman emperors, however, those of Claudius have incorporated his physical disabilities into the physiognomical depictions. Through the perspective of Robert Garland (2010) and disability studies theorist, Tobin Siebers (2008; 2010), Claudius becomes a pagan foil for the numerous physiognomic descriptions found in the New Testament. Depictions of Claudius' disability physiognomically, therefore, represents an anomaly both from the perspective of Julio-Claudian rule of Rome as well as in the context of Second Sophistic thought that influenced many of the writers of the New Testament. As Josiah Osgood (2011) has argued, depictions of Claudius have been subject to changing trends in historiography beginning with ancient texts and continuing through modern depictions. This paper builds on scholarship about physiognomy by focusing specifically on Claudius' impairments and their ubiquitous treatment by ancient biographers to posit what I would like to call "physiognomic disability."

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