

BLACK EYES IN GREEK EROTIC POETRY AND THE PHYSIOGNOMICAL TRADITION

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The present article aims to review the evidence for black or dark eyes in ancient poetry, track the development of this convention over time, and ascertain whether it is possible to identify changes in what black/dark eyes signify. The article will further explore whether the association of this convention in poetry is replicated in physiognomical texts, which constitute another genre of ancient discourse in which eyes, including their various hues, receive detailed attention.

Key words: black eyes; Greek poetry; physiognomy.

References to black or dark eyes are widely scattered in the European erotic literature tradition, and it would seem plausible that ancient Greek and Latin poetry, which had a significant influence on the conventions and tropes of European literature, were responsible for this. The present article aims to review the evidence for black or dark eyes in ancient poetry, track the development of this convention over time, and ascertain whether it is possible to identify what black/dark eyes signify. The article will further explore how this idea in poetry is treated in physiognomical texts, another genre of ancient discourse in which eyes and their various hues receive detailed attention.

The study will focus on two Greek terms (and their compounds) for describing black or dark eyes, namely μέλας (black) and κύνεος (bluish black).¹ Μέλας is easily translatable into English as ‘black’, whereas κύνεος is more problematic. Its essential connection with dark hue is indicated by the fact that Homer uses the adjective μέλας to denote the colour of the decorative material κύανος,² but in the same passage of the *Iliad* the κύνεοι δράκοντες (‘dark serpents’) which decorate Agamemnon’s breastplate are said to be,

¹ For Greek texts lemma searches have been conducted through the *TLG* for combinations of the adjectives μέλας and κύνεος with the nouns ὄμμα and ὄφθαλμός, as well as specific compounds beginning with μελανο- and κυαν-. It is very difficult to determine exactly how the ancients perceived colour, though much research has been done on this topic; see Clarke 2004; Bradley 2011.

² μέλανος κύναιοι; *Il.* 11.24 of the bands on Agamemnon’s breastplate and 35 of the bosses on his shield. On the possible identification of this substance, already mentioned in Mycenaean Linear B, see Beck, *Lfgre* s.v. κύανος, col. 1570, 18–22.

ἴρισσιν εἰκότες, ἅς τε Κρονίων
 ἐν νέφεϊ στήριξε τέρας μερόπων ἀνθρώπων

like rainbows which the son of Cronus sets
 in a cloud as a portent for mortal men (*Il.* 11.27–28)

which implies an iridescent quality and something wondrous.

As Anderson shows, μέλας was certainly a basic colour term in ancient Greek taxonomy, whereas κυάνεος, which probably means ‘dark’ but is often translated as ‘indigo’, ‘dark blue’ or ‘blue black’, is not.³ Μέλας denotes the very darkest of dark colours: according to Plato (*Ti.* 67e–68b) μέλας is the darkness that compresses the visual stream to total elimination.⁴ More important for our study, though, are the connotations of these colours. In general terms, μέλας is often associated with grief which is transformed into vengefulness and anger, snakes, ‘death, mourning and the underworld,’ night, the fecund earth, and the furies.⁵ Common collocations are ‘black death’, ‘black night’, ‘black earth’, and the like.⁶

Μέλας, however, is also used on occasion to describe eyes in the context of beauty. It has become something of a commonplace that black eyes in the Greek and Roman worlds denoted beauty. Clarke states that ‘black eyes as a mark of beauty go back to Greek literature where they were given the colour epithet μέλας’.⁷ This is an echo of the analysis put forward already in 1651 by Robert Burton’s *Anatomy of melancholy*, where the link between black eyes and beauty was emphasized.⁸ In his section on beauty as a cause of melancholy, Burton states that black eyes in the Classical period were ‘most amiable, enticing, and fairer’. Clarke gives two examples to support her statement about the link between black eyes and beauty, both of which concern men (from Bacchylides and the *Anacreontea*). Her citation from Bacchylides, where Theseus is responding to the fact that Minos has touched Eriboea’s face, is not strictly about beauty:

³ Anderson 2003:117. Many studies on the colour black exist, such as those of Pastoureau 2008, see 27, and Harvey 2013, especially chapter two. For a comprehensive treatment of κυάνεος and μέλας in Greek poetry, see Irwin 1974:79–110 and 157–200.

⁴ Deacy and Villing 2009:118.

⁵ Deacy and Villing 2009:117.

⁶ Various usages in Bacchylides give good examples of some of these connotations (cf. Bacchyl. 13, 13, fr. 29): the black (or blue/black) cloud of death (θανάτοιο κυάνεον νέφος), black earth (γαῖα μέλαινα), black-shrouded ghost (μελαγκευθὲς εἶδωλον), and Boreas as conveyor of Aphrodite’s parching frenzy is dark (ἐρεμνός, *Ibyc.* 286P.11).

⁷ Clarke 2003:100.

⁸ Robert Burton 1651:466–467.

ἴδεν δὲ Θησεύς,
 μέλαν δ' ὑπ' ὀφρύων
 δίνα[σ]εν ὄμμα, καρδίαν τε οἱ
 σχέτλιον ἄμυξεν ἄλγος

Theseus saw this,
 whirled his eye, black
 beneath its brows,
 and shocking pain
 tore at his heart (Bacchylides *Ode* 17.16–19 (= *Dithyramb* 3)).

The context requires that the focus be on Theseus' heroic rage rather than his attractiveness.⁹

Clarke's other reference, to poem 17 of the *Anacreontea*,¹⁰ is actually from a much later text, probably from the Imperial period, and indicates how dark eyes had been integrated into erotic poetry after the Hellenistic period. The poem takes the form of a series of instructions for a commissioned painting of Bathyllus, the poet-lover's object of desire.¹¹ As such, it manifests a sophisticated tension between a desire to represent the *eromenos* as he actually appears, and the conventional traits which the palette of erotic conventions provides:

ὀφρὺς
 κυανωτέρη δρακόντων
 μέλαν ὄμμα γοργὸν ἔστω
 κεκερασμένον γαλήνη,
 τὸ μὲν ἐξ Ἄρηος ἔλκον,
 τὸ δὲ τῆς καλῆς Κυθήρης,
 ἵνα τις τὸ μὲν φοβῆται,
 τὸ δ' ἀπ' ἐλπίδος κρεμᾶται.

Let his brow be darker than snakes,
 his black eye ferocious mixed with serenity,

⁹ See Mahler (2004:181), who suggests comparison with *Il.* 4.117: μελαινέων . . . ὀδυνάων; also 4.191, and 17.83, 499, 573 (where pain is the issue) or 1.103–104: μένος δὲ μέγα φρένες ἀμφὶ μέλαινα / πίμπλαντ' (rage). The phrase δίνα[σ]εν ὄμμα might be comparable to *Il.* 17.680: the narrator uses this verb for how Menelaus' eyes roved about (like an eagle looking for prey in the simile); it is also the verb used in a lyric context in Eur. *Or.* 1459.

¹⁰ In Campbell 1988:185.

¹¹ The poem is a companion piece to the heteroerotic poem 16, in which one notes the female subject of the painting should have βλεφάρων ἴτυν κελαινὴν, 'a dark rim around the eyelids', line 17.

the one drawn from Ares,
 the other from beautiful Cythera,
 so that one may fear the one
 and be kept in suspense as to the other from hope
 (*Anacreontea* 17.10–17 Campbell).

The author of this poem is clearly drawing on early Greek poetry, especially the famous arming scene of Agamemnon in *Iliad* 11 where Agamemnon's breastplate is decorated with κύνεοι δράκοντες (26), his shield with a 'grim-faced Gorgon looking fierce' (Γοργῶ βλοσυρῶπις . . . / . . . δεινὸν δερκομένη, 36–37), and his belt with a κύνεος δράκων (39). Superficially, Bathyllus' eyes are beautiful, but the ferocity associated with their dark hue is ultimately drawn from the conventions of the warrior heroes of the epic tradition, even if repurposed here to emphasise the paradoxical combination of ferocity and compliance celebrated in an erotic context.¹² As Ippokratis Kantzios (2016:377–378) notes about Bathyllus, 'his gaze certainly has power to impact the viewer'. Black eyes, in this instance, certainly grant the object of desire a degree of power over the gaze of the desirer. It is plausible that they are being used, therefore, to challenge notions about the passivity of compliant males (and, by implication, of females).

In fact, the adjective κύνεος is more prominent than μέλας in connection with eyes in the earliest poetry.¹³ Although Athena is famously γλαυκῶπις, in several places the early Greek poets specify the eye-colour of goddesses and female heroes as dark in hue, and the preferred adjective is κύνεος.¹⁴ In Homer, the epithet κυανῶπις is connected to Amphitrite (*Od.* 12.60) which might imply that it is appropriate for a goddess of the sea. So too we find it attached to the Pleiad Electra in a fragment of Hesiod (frag. 169.1) who has Oceanid connections. But it is clearly not restricted to such deities. In Hesiod's *Shield of Heracles*, Heracles applies the same epithet to Themistinoe (356), wife of Cynus and daughter of Ceyx, while at the beginning of the same poem we are told that Alcmene surpassed all women in beauty, stature, and wisdom, and also

¹² The adjective γοργός occurs several times in connection with warrior-heroes in threatening poses: Hom. *Il.* 8.349 Γοργοῦς ὄμματ' ἔχων ἠδὲ βροτολοιοῦ Ἄρεος (Hector), Aesch. *Sept.* 537 (Parthenopaeus); Eur. *Andr.* 458 (Menelaus), 1123 (Neoptolemus), *Supp.* 322 (Athens), *Phoen.* 146–147 (Parthenopaeus), *HF* 990 ὄμμα Γοργόνοσ στρέφωσ (Heracles)

¹³ Irwin (1974:101) notes that μέλας is rarely used of eyes in poetry but more often in prose, while κύνεος is more frequent in poetry but rarer in prose.

¹⁴ Leumann (1950:152) believes κυανῶπις is modelled on γλαυκῶπις.

τῆς καὶ ἀπὸ κρηθὲν βλεφάρων τ' ἄπο κυανεάων
τοῖον ἄηθ' οἷόν τε πολυχρύσου Ἀφροδίτης. (lines 7–8)

From head to toe and from her dark-hued eyes
she breathed such as much-golden Aphrodite.¹⁵

The entire passage assembles attributes which the poet explicitly connects with her perfection as a wife:

ἦ δὲ καὶ ὧς κατὰ θυμὸν ἔδν τίσκεν ἀκοίτην,
ὧς οὐ πῶ τις ἔτισε γυναικῶν θηλυτεράων. (lines 9–10)

And she so honoured her husband
in her heart as no woman yet has.

Yet the epithet's conventional quality can be inferred from the fact that it is also attached by Hesiod to the name of Clytemnestra (frag. 23a.14 and 27) who could be regarded as the antithesis to the kind of wife which Alcmena represents.¹⁶

The adjective *κυάνεος* is also connected to the eyes of male divinities. In the *Homeric Hymn* 1 to Dionysus, 'Zeus nodded with his dark brows' (*κυανέησιν ἐπ' ὀφρύσι νεῦσε Κρονίων*, *Hom. Hymn* 1.13) following his declaration that men will offer sacrifice to Semele hereafter.¹⁷ In another hymn, the god Dionysus, whom Tyrrhenian pirates have mistaken for the son of a chieftain and are trying unsuccessfully to bind, 'sat smiling with his dark eyes' (*μειδιάων ἐκάθητο / ὄμμασι κυανέοισι*, *Hom. Hymn* 7.14–15). The colour-term perhaps underscores the god's amused confidence in his power.

In the fifth century BC the epithet is applied to warships (*κυανόπιδες* in Aesch. *Pers.* 559 and *Supp.* 743), both in contexts where they inspire terror. In Aeschylus' *Persians* 81–82, the chorus' description of Xerxes as *κυάνεον δ' ὄμμασι λεύσσων / φονίου δέργμα δράκοντος* ('giving the dark glance of a deadly snake') as he leads his host, is comparable.¹⁸ However, as Sommerstein (2008:6) notes, following Hall, 'the image of the Persian male has been systematically feminized all through the play'. The context is not erotic, but a link is created, by implication, through the use of dark eyes, between male aggression

¹⁵ One can compare *ἰαννογ[λ]εφάρων* ('violet-eyed') in Alcmen. 1.69.

¹⁶ Hesiod frag. 25.14 also uses the epithet with Althaea.

¹⁷ The phrase is Homeric (*Il.* 1.528, 17.209) but in *Il.* 15.102–104 Hera is afforded a similar description: 'she laughed with her mouth, but the forehead above her dark brows did not relax' (*ἦ δ' ἐγέλασσε / χεῖλεσιν οὐδὲ μέτωπον ἐπ' ὀφρύσι κυανέησιν / ἰάνθη*).

¹⁸ One notes that Alcestis describes Hades coming for her 'staring beneath his dark brows' (*ὕπ' ὀφρύσι κυαναγγέσι / βλέπων*, Eur. *Alc.* 261–262), and Euripides is fond of including the brows as indicators of hostility (*IA* 648).

and supposed female passivity, which may serve to undercut rather than enhance Xerxes' power.

The same colour term is first found in an unambiguously erotic context in Ibycus:¹⁹

Ἔρος αὐτέ με κυανέοισιν ὑπὸ
 βλεφάροις τακέρ' ὄμμασι δερκόμενος
 κηλήμασι παντοδαποῖς ἐς ἄπει-
 ρα δίκτυα Κύπριδος ἐσβάλλει
 ἧ μὲν τρομέω νιν ἐπερχόμενον

Once again, Eros giving me melting looks from beneath his dark lids drives me with charms of every kind into nets from which there is no escape; truly, I tremble at his approach... (Ibycus 287 P.1–5).

Although there is an obvious parallel between κυανέοισιν ὑπὸ / βλεφάροις τακέρ' ὄμμασι δερκόμενος and Hesiod's βλεφάρων τ' ἄπο κυανέων (*Shield* 7, of Alcmene) which serves to confirm the beauty of Eros, Ibycus' phrase also resembles Bacchylides' μέλαν δ' ὑπ' ὀφρύων / δίνα[σ]εν ὄμμα (17.17–18). The adjective is deployed in a context where the god's onset inspires fear (τρομέω νιν ἐπερχόμενον, 5), a sign of the unstoppable power of the divinity and perhaps of his hostile intention, given the hunting imagery of lines 3–4 (δίκτυα Κύπριδος).²⁰ Yet of course there is a wonderful paradox in these lines, because Eros simultaneously *lures* the poet-lover into Aphrodite's net with his manifold charms. In another fragment of Ibycus, Peitho, a divine attendant of Aphrodite, has the epithet ἀγανοβλέφαρος ('gentle-lidded', 288.3) which is more in keeping with the seductive representative of the erotic pantheon. In Ibyc. 287, Eros' dark eyelids are entirely compatible with the combination of violence and desire which characterise the god's profile elsewhere in early Greek poetry.

The adjective κυάνεος emerges in later Greek as an option for denoting beauty in either divine or mortal entities.²¹ Thus, in Theocritus (3.18–19), a lover

¹⁹ And possibly homoerotic, if the god Eros with his 'melting glances' (τακέρ' ὄμμασι δερκόμενος, 2) is indistinguishable from the poet's object of desire; see Davies 1986:403 n.21. For a view that Eros' glance represents rather a generalisation (all the speaker's love-objects), see Papadimitropoulos 2016:26.

²⁰ On Eros/Love as hunter see Davies 1980.

²¹ Following the lead of Homer and Hesiod, but with expanded application, the adjective becomes a standard element in the elevated lexicon of later Greek epic and hexametric poetry, e.g., Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* 1.3 (Symplegades), 223 (the hair of anthropomorphised female clouds), 474 (Idas' chin stained with wine), 777 (*aither*), 3.140 (spiral on ball made

addresses Amaryllis as ‘dark-browed nymph’ (ὄ κῦάνοφρυ / νόμφο); in an encomium to Ptolemy Philadelphus the mother of the mythical hero Diomedes is addressed as ‘dark-browed lady from Argos’ (Ἀργεία κῦάνοφρυ, 17.53); and even in a context which is more ironic and bawdy, Battus asks Corydon to fill him in on the local gossip:

Εἶπ’ ἄγε μ’, ὦ Κορύδων, τὸ γερόντιον ἦ ῥ’ ἔτι μύλλει
τῆναν τὰν κῦάνοφρυν ἐρωτίδα τᾶς ποκ’ ἐκνίσθη;

Come on, Corydon, tell me! Is the little old man still grinding
that dark-browed darling with whom he was once besotted?
(4.58–59).²²

Unsurprisingly, the Latin poets under the influence of the Hellenic tradition also apply adjectives denoting black/dark to the eyes in erotic contexts. Perhaps the earliest example of this connection is to be found in Plautus’ *Poenulus* 1113, where a nurse kidnapped from Carthage is described as *specie venusta, ore atque oculis pernigris* (‘attractive in appearance, with very dark face and eyes’).²³ Yet more obviously relevant are the very occasional occurrences in poets of the late Republic and early Principate. Catullus, comparing Mamurra’s mistress Ameana unfavourably with his own Lesbia, includes ‘black eyes’ (*nec nigris ocellis*, 43.2) in his catalogue of things which she lacks. The desirability of this attribute finds confirmation in other Latin love poets: the girl of whom Propertius sings has black eyes (*lumina nigra*, 2.12.23);²⁴ in his appeal to his lyre, Horace recalls that Alcaeus once sang of Lycus ‘beautiful with his black eyes’ (*Lycum nigris oculis . . . decorum*, *Carm.* 1.32.11–12).²⁵

The texts reviewed above indicate that dark/black eyes, especially denoted by adjectives based on the words μέλας and κῦάνεος, and sometimes associated

by Adrasteia, 1031 (clothing Jason must wear for Hecate’s ritual), 4.843 (the sea), 1516 (blood), *Nic. Ther.* 299 (swelling from a snakebite), 729 (type of spider), Callim. *Hecale* fr. 74.17 Hollis [= fr. 260.58 Pfeiffer] (raven wings’ colour of pitch), *Opp. H.* 1.794 (earth), 3.158 (cuttle-fish ink), *C.* 1.427 (breed of hunting-dogs), 3.275 (stripes on a hyena), 3.508 (species of hare).

²² Hunter (1999:143) speculates that the object of the old man’s attention could even be a farm animal.

²³ The nurse’s complexion is generally dark (*aquilus*) as established in the previous line 1112, possibly due to her North African origin.

²⁴ The noun selected for ‘eyes’ here (*lumina*) potentially creates an oxymoronic tension with the adjective *nigra* and may suggest dark eyes that are bright.

²⁵ In his *Ars poetica*, Horace entertains the possibility that he himself would be admired for his dark eyes and hair (*spectandum nigris oculis nigroque capillo*, 73).

with lustre, brightness, or gloss, become conventionally applied to figures who are broadly divine, exceptional, powerful, or inspire awe in the viewer. The inclusion of beauty in this field of signification constitutes a consistent category which is occasionally applied in erotic poetry, both heterosexual and homosexual.

We have already seen how a Greek poet of the Imperial period (*Anacreontea* 17) utilises the complex associations of dark eyes to capture the desirability of the object of desire. Another poet of the Imperial period, Strato of Sardis, adopts the conceit but introduces an innovation which possibly owes something to intellectual developments of the late first and early second centuries AD:

τοὺς λευκοὺς ἀγαπῶ, φιλέω δ' ἅμα τοὺς μελιχρῶδεις
καὶ ξανθοὺς, στέργω δ' ἔμπαλι τοὺς μέλανας.
Οὐδὲ κόρας ξανθὰς παραπέμπομαι ἄλλὰ περισσῶς
τοὺς μελανοφθάλμους αἰγλοφανεῖς τε φιλῶ

I'm fond of fair boys, but I like both those with a honey-complexion
and blondes, and conversely, I love dark boys.
I don't reject pupils which are yellow; but I especially
love boys with bright black eyes (*Anth. Pal.* 12.5 = Strato 5 Floridi).

Strato proclaims that he has inclusive tastes,²⁶ but expresses a particular passion for boys with bright black eyes. The unusual labelling of (pupils) of eyes as yellow (ξανθὰς, line 2)²⁷ is an indication that Strato has more in mind here than conventional poetic descriptions of eye colour. Furthermore, the word μελανόφθαλμος is unattested in any other poetic text, though sometimes used by scholiasts and lexicographers to gloss Homeric words.²⁸ It is, however, employed by medical, scientific/philosophical and astrological writers in prose, as well as in physiognomical texts.²⁹ Several of these occurrences involve the attribution of characteristics relevant to health or personality. The following passage is from Philostratus' *De gymnastica*, in a context where the author insists that, among other things, the director of a gymnasium (γυμναστής) must review the entire science of physiognomy (φυσιογνωμικὴν τε ἐπεσκέφθω πᾶσαν, 25):

²⁶ The theme is well established in Greek and Latin erotic poetry.

²⁷ See Floridi 2007:137.

²⁸ Floridi 2007:138.

²⁹ E.g., Hippoc. *Epid.* 1.2.9 (humans), Arist. *Gen. an.* 779a31 (oxen), 779a35 (humans), Sext. Emp. *Math.* 7.198 (humans), Philostr. *Her.* 26.13 (statue of Nestor), Ptol. *Tetr.* 3.12.3 (humans). Floridi (2007:138) points out that the adjective which Strato uses with this noun is unique but notes the phrase αἰγλή παμφανώσα in *Il.* 2.458.

γινωσκέτω δὴ τὴν ἐν ὀφθαλμοῖς ἠθικὴν πᾶσαν, ὅφ' ἦς δηλοῦνται μὲν οἱ
 νωθοὶ τῶν ἀνθρώπων, δηλοῦνται δὲ οἱ ζύντονοι, εἰρωνές τε καὶ ἦττον
 καρτερικοὶ καὶ ἀκρατεῖς· ἄλλα γὰρ μελανοφθάλμων, ἄλλα δὲ χαροπῶν τε
 καὶ γλαυκῶν καὶ ὑφαίμων ὀφθαλμῶν ἦθη, ἕτερα δὲ ξανθῶν καὶ
 ὑπεστιγμένων, προπαλῶν τε καὶ κοίλων· ἡ γὰρ φύσις ὄρας μὲν ἄστροις
 ἐσημήνατο, ἦθη δὲ ὀφθαλμοῖς.

Let him recognise the entire moral character by means of the eyes; by this means sluggish men are revealed and those who are keen, as well as dissemblers, those less capable of endurance, and those who cannot control themselves. For the moral characters of those with black eyes, blue eyes, pale-blue eyes, or bloodshot eyes are different; and different are those of people with yellow-brown eyes and mottled eyes, of people with prominent eyes and with hollow eyes. For nature marked the seasons by stars, and moral characters by eyes.

In his epigram, Strato uses the word *μελανόφθαλμοι*, which by the early Imperial period had already been established as a sort of classificatory and anatomical *terminus technicus* in prose, to designate a class of young men who share a feature which he finds erotically attractive. The epigram seems to be entirely focused on the physical appearance of the objects of Strato's desire, and there are no explicit indications that his descriptions of the eyes (yellow or black) are intended to impute a specific character to their bearers. Yet the striking intrusion of this term invites discussion of black eyes in physiognomical texts which exerted intellectual influence from the first centuries of the Imperial period.

The Greek physiognomist Polemon (c. AD 88–144) devoted the first chapter of his *Physiognomy* to the description of eyes, as he claimed that eyes are the 'gateway to the heart' (Hoyland 2007:341). Understanding the eyes leads, in part, to understanding of character. His system for describing eyes is extremely complex, using dots, rings, moisture and dryness, and the like, but colour is also an important factor in his analysis. Ian Repath (2007:491) notes that translating Greek colour terms in physiognomical texts is difficult, though he does acknowledge that 'some terms are relatively straightforward (e.g., "black" and "white")'. For the Greeks, as Jas Elsner (2007:219) points out, colour was not primarily a matter of hue as it is for us in the post-Newtonian world: important for Polemon are contrast or 'light and dark', 'luminosity, movement, dryness, or wetness within the eye', and 'sparkle' or 'glitter'. Elsner speculates that Polemon may have been guilty of deliberate obfuscation in his system, but concedes that the understanding of black is fairly straightforward: '*Melas* is one colour term whose meaning has not been

controversial – it implies black or dark in the sense of being deprived of light (both in hue and brightness)’ (2007:220-201).³⁰

While it would seem reasonable to assume that Polemon was influenced by some of the established poetic connotations associated with the adjectives *κυάνεος* and *μέλας*, examination of his classificatory descriptions suggests that the situation is far more complex, even when he uses some of the same terms found in poetry. Hue by itself is rarely significant, and colour is often combined with other traits connected with the eyes to diagnose the character and behaviour of an individual. Thus, in a section devoted to ‘moving eyes’ (περι ὀφθαλμῶν κινουμένων, Adamantius A7 Repath 2007a:500), it is claimed that:

ὀφθαλμοὶ μικροὶ ὑπότρομοὶ γλαυκοὶ ἀναδεῖς, ἄπιστοι, ἄδικοι, τὰ ἀλλότρια πρᾶσσοντες κακὰ, ζῶντες ἀπὸ συμφορῶν. ὀφθαλμοὶ μικροὶ ὑπότρομοὶ χαραποὶ ἢ μέλανες τὰ αὐτὰ σημαίνουσιν, παρόσον οἱ μὲν χαραποὶ ἐμπληκτότεροι καὶ ἀβουλότεροι, οἱ δὲ μέλανες δυσορρητότεροι καὶ ἀναίσχυντοι.

Eyes which are small and quivering and light blue, are shameless, faithless, unjust, commit crimes against what belongs to other people, and live from misfortunes. Eyes which are small and quivering, but dark blue or black, show the same things, insofar as those which are dark blue are more rash and more imprudent, while those that are black are quicker to anger and shameless (transl. Repath 2007a:501).

In this passage, the principal traits used in diagnosis are size and a type of movement, while hue (from light blue through dark blue to black) is employed only to specify secondary considerations which yield an impression of precision and sophistication to the science.

In another section, ‘on eyes changeable in colour’ (περι αἰόλων ὀφθαλμῶν, Adamantius A11, Repath 2007a:504), the physiognomist addresses the fact that eyes can even change their hue, and that the attribution of colour is itself sometimes unstable:

οἱ χαραποὶ ὀφθαλμοὶ ἀπὸ τῶν μελάνων χωρίζονται τῷ αἰόλῳ πολλὰ γὰρ αὐτῶν τὰ εἶδη. καὶ οἱ μὲν μέλανες ὀφθαλμοὶ ἄνανδρα ἤθη καὶ φιλοκερδῆ καὶ ἄπιστα δηλοῦσιν, οἱ δὲ χαραποὶ τοιοῦδε εἰσίν. ἢ μὲν χροία ἐπιπρέπει

³⁰ Polemon also uses *κυάνεος* occasionally, or blue-black. Elsner (2007:220 n.61) distinguishes *κυάνεος* from *μέλας*: ‘...while both mean ‘dark’ or ‘black’ in the hue ranges, *kuaneos* has the sense of brightness while *melas* is dull in the brilliance range (where they are opposites)’.

αὐτοῖς μέλαινα ὡς ἀπλῶς ἰδεῖν, ἐσαθροῦντι δὲ κέγχροι ἔνεισι <αἱ μὲν> πυρραὶ οὐ σφόδρα, αἱ δὲ λευκαὶ καὶ ἐπιλευκότεραι, ἄλλαι δὲ ὠχραὶ καὶ ἄλλαι <κυαναῖ> τοῦ ὠχροῦ τῷ πυρρῷ μεμιγμένου ἢ τοῦ μέλανος τούτοις.

Dark blue eyes are separated from black ones by the changeability of their colour. For their appearances are many. And black eyes show unmanly and greedy and faithless characters, while dark blue eyes are as follows. Their colour appears to be black at first glance, but the close observer notices that there are dots in them, some red, although not very, some white and rather pale, others are pale yellow, and others are dark with pale yellow mixed with red or black mixed with these (transl. Repath 2007a:505).

While black eyes are here linked to negative character traits, the passage emphasizes that the careful observer (ἐσαθροῦντι), *i.e.* the expert physiognomist, is able to detect spots or flecks which might not be noticed by the layperson. The superficial identification of the colour of an iris may require closer scrutiny. These minor differences can have very significant effects, as we read a little further in the same section (Adamantius A11, Repath 2007a:504):

ἐν τοῖς μέλασι τὰ μὴ πάνυ πυρρά, ὀπόσοις πόρρωθεν τὸ μέλαν μόνον ἐπιπρέπει, γενναῖα τὰ ἦθη, συνετά, δίκαια, εὐφυῆ, μεγαλόνοα σημαίνει. ὅσοις δὲ τὰ πυρρά ταῦτα πάνυ πυρρά, τετράγωνα καὶ μὴ κεχρωτὰ ἔνι καὶ ὑπολάμπει ἔσω ὥσπερ πῦρ καὶ πρὸς τούτοις κέγχροι ὠχραὶ ταῖς πυρώδεσι μεμιγμένοι εἰσὶ καὶ ἕτεροι γλαυκαί, ἴτυες δὲ αἱματώδεις ἢ κυαναῖ περιθέουσι τὰς κόρας, οὔτοι κάκιστοι.

Not very red bits in black eyes, so that from a distance only the black appears, indicate noble, intelligent, just, talented, and great-minded characters. Those in whom these red bits are very red, square-shaped, and not dotted and gleam inside like fire and in addition to these have pale yellow dots mixed in with the red ones and other light blue ones, and blood-red or dark rims run around the pupils... these are the worst of all (transl. Repath 2007a:505).

Slightly red flecks in black eyes, it turns out, indicate a noble character who is *completely* unlike the unmanly person with black eyes described a little earlier in the section. And yet from a distance (and so presumably to anyone other than the trained physiognomist) the noble, intelligent person would be indistinguishable

from the unmanly, greedy person!³¹ Although a young male with slightly red flecks in his black eyes (on closer inspection) might coincidentally conform in character with an idealised *eromenos*, it is clear from a passage such as this that the erotic conventions of Greek poetry have little, if anything, to do with the classifications of the physiognomists. The generally negative diagnosis of eyes with a dark hue is sustained in other sections: dark dull eyes (ὄφθαλμοὶ σκότιοι) are associated with folly, dishonesty and untrustworthiness (Adamantius A15, Repath 2007a:508); while sparkling eyes are basically a bad sign, *black* sparkling eyes are very bad, cowardly, and extremely mischievous (Adamantius A16, Repath 2007a:508).³² From these characterizations it is obvious that Polemon's tradition is largely negative about those who have black eyes.³³

Polemon, via Adamantius, only uses *κυάνεος* six times, and these only in two sections (A8 and A11). 'Black eyes (οἱ κυανοῖ) are generally moister, and these are much better than the others' (Adamantius A8, Repath 2007a:503), while eyes that have black pebbles (ψηφίδες κυανᾶ) around the pupils, in combination with other colours, can show treacherous characters who are intelligent, but not daring (Adamantius A8, Repath 2007a:502). In summary, it seems that black eyes in Polemon's physiognomical tradition can show a variety of negative traits, including cowardice, greed, deceit, tameness, shamelessness, and unmanliness or effeminacy, but also anger.

In the poetic and erotic tradition reviewed earlier in this paper, it is very difficult to detect a link between black eyes and cowardice, or greed and deceit, as maintained in Polemon and the physiognomists. While there is a link between ferocity and anger and black eyes in Polemon, there is none between black eyes and beauty. There is also definitely a link in the poetic tradition between black eyes and males as objects of desire, or powerful female figures.

It might be worth noting that Polemon's text is condemnatory of 'effeminacy, pederasty, and sodomy'.³⁴ In Adamantius B41, cowardliness, being faint-hearted, and androgyny are strongly correlated, all examples of 'unmanly' behaviour, as Swain (2007b:188) points out. The overwhelming impression one

³¹ A little further in the same section we are informed that blood-red flecks (αἱ αἱματώδεις τῶν κέγγρων) in black eyes indicate poisoners, pale yellow ones indicate trickery and knowledge of poisons.

³² The same section includes the observation that eyes with a fierce look are terrible (ὄφθαλμοὶ γοργὸν βλέποντες δεινοί), and one recalls that phrases resembling γοργὸν βλέποντες occur in poetry.

³³ See Swain 2007:185. Cf. Anonymus Latinus 27 Repath 2007b:573.

³⁴ Swain 2007a:13. See also Swain 2007b:187–190 for discussion of Polemon's 'effeminates'.

gains from a review of the evidence in this article suggests that the poetic tradition and the physiognomical tradition approached the phenomenon of black/dark eyes with substantially different assumptions and objectives. In physiognomical texts of the Imperial period, anatomical features are signs of the emotions and, ultimately, psychological characteristics, of the individuals who exhibit those features. In the poetic tradition, especially the erotic, anatomical features, when mentioned, are indicative rather of the effect that the object of desire has on the subject of desire.³⁵ As Thomas Hubbard (2003:11) makes clear, the ‘power dynamics’ in same sex relationships of various types in ancient Greece and Rome were complex. However, he states, with much supporting textual evidence, that ‘to the extent that literary texts display a power differential, it is rather to emphasize the powerlessness and even emotional helplessness of the lover and a privileged position of control occupied by the beloved youth’. The evidence in this article suggests that the idea of black eyes was broadly used, in various ways, to attribute a degree of power to effeminate men and manly women. We could conjecture that it was the existence of a tradition, especially in Greek literature, of a connection between black eyes and men as objects of desire, or ‘unwomanly’ women, that caused Polemon to strip their association with beauty in his own text, and to attribute largely negative characteristics, such as cowardice, to black eyes. As such, the physiognomical tradition in this regard might be seen as a conservative attempt to impose patriarchally normative gender and sexual stereotypes on an existing tradition which threatened simplistic assumptions of male power.

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³⁵ Stavru 2019:157–158 argues that authors of the Second Sophistic exploit vivid descriptions of physiognomical details in order to appeal to the emotions of the reader.

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