

## PARSING PRUSSIAN PERSONALITY: CHRISTIAN THOMASIVS AND THE PSYCHOGRAM

Fourth Edmund Spevack Memorial Lecture at Adams House, Harvard University, October 20, 2006. Co-sponsored by the GHI and the Edmund Spevack Memorial Trust. Speaker: Mack Walker (Johns Hopkins University).

This Memorial Lecture honors the memory of the historian Edmund Spevack, who was closely connected to both Harvard University, where he was an undergraduate and later taught, and to the GHI, where he was a Research Fellow before his untimely passing. After introductory remarks by Sean Palfrey (Master of Adams House), Witold Potempa (Edmund Spevack Memorial Trust) and Richard F. Wetzell (GHI), the Fourth Edmund Spevack Memorial Lecture was delivered by Edmund's doctoral adviser, Mack Walker of Johns Hopkins University.

Walker spoke on the fascinating topic "Parsing Prussian Personality: Christian Thomasius and the Psychogram." Christian Thomasius (1655–1728) was a German law professor best known for his formal denial of evidence obtained by torture and his rejection of criminal liability for witchcraft. A less well-known and earlier episode offers, if not exactly a professional parable, then perhaps an instructive anecdote. When Thomasius was appointed to the senior chair in law at Halle, a university that had been recently founded to train civil officials and pastors for the Prussian state, he offered the Prussian government in Berlin a scheme for personality analysis to guide its domestic personnel practices and its negotiations with other powers. His project was to assign arithmetical quantities to key character traits—greed, love, ambition, sensuality—in order to produce psychological profiles that would allow prediction and manipulation of the analyzed subject's behavior. Thomasius set about testing the procedure by analyzing colleagues and acquaintances, and by assigning to his students practice analyses of prominent biblical characters and contemporary figures. After several months of experimentation, however, he concluded, mainly on evidence from the self-analysis he himself experienced, that it was impossible to prevent the analyst's own personality mix from distorting and corrupting his weighing of others' personalities. As a result, he renounced and withdrew the project. All this left Thomasius wondering what kind of knowledge of others was possible after all, but after a lengthy silence he abandoned this line of inquiry and turned to procedural issues such as torture and witchcraft. Mack Walker's lecture was followed by a lively discussion.

*Richard F. Wetzell*