

est enim actio quasi sermo corporis: Body, Language, and Performance in Roman Oratory

Throughout the *De oratore*, Cicero's interlocutors argue and monologue about what skills, abilities, and mannerisms the ideal orator should have. Over the course of their conversations they cover the topics *inventio*, *dispositio*, and *elocutio* in exhaustive detail. *Memoria* and especially *actio*, however, are given relatively little consideration in the text. Cicero begins his discussion of *actio* with the phrase: *est enim actio quasi sermo corporis* "for *actio* is like the speech of the body" (*De oratore* 3.222). Fantham pointedly remarks that this is not "body language" in the modern conception, but rather a *deliberate* use of the body, further citing the famous anecdotes about Cicero and Roscius (2004).

The two men, orator and actor, apparently held friendly competitions to see who could present a certain thought better – by words or gesture, respectively (Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, 3.14.11-12). As a result, Cicero most likely had a close working knowledge and appreciation of theatrical gesture. Both oratory and theater are performances, offerings of words and bodies for the express purpose of *moving* the audience – to vote for or against a candidate or to sympathize with a character's plight. Theater is explicit about this goal; the audience is aware that the actors are playing parts. Oratory (or at least good oratory) does its best to obfuscate these performative aspects in the delivery itself. Both theater and oratory are different types of performances, and thus share some recognizable traits: emotional appeal and manipulation, repeated tropes (*τόποι*), a designated performance space, and a defined or semi-defined body of understandable gestures. In primarily oral societies like Rome, gestures were an essential component of every public speech. When audience members were too far away to hear the speech clearly, they could still watch the orator, looking at his movement and gestures, in order to follow at least the general

sense of his speech. Since these speeches were given in the Forum, both elite and non-elite could attend. Orators' gestures could thus be transmitted not just to other orators, but to the populace of the city at large. In time this probably formed a common nonverbal language open to all regardless of class (Corbeill 2004; Fantham 2004), enmeshing hand/body-as-tool with gesture (Leroi-Gourhan 1993).

In this way, the Forum served both to diminish and reinforce class inequalities. It was one of the most important oratorical spaces in the entire city, offering speakers a platform to address people from all corners of Roman society. In this paper, I will analyze the Forum as a performance space, exploring the implications for orator and audience via Richard Schechner's work on theory of performance (Schechner 2003, 2006). Viewing the Forum through this lens, I argue that speaking, performing bodies worked to create a sense of "the Roman people," the power of gesture in constructing notions of masculinity, and the ability of both to shape and manipulate memory.

Bibliography

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