CHAPTER TWO

SPEECH, CHARACTER, AND SELF-DEFINITION

I. Speech as it Relates to Character

For Greeks and Romans, speech was an indicator of one's character and place in society. *Talis oratio, qualis vita:* “As the speech, so the life.”1 One woman's charming speech was an important enough virtue to be recorded on her epitaph.2 When Theophrastus wanted to describe different “characters,” he frequently focused on how they spoke. In addition to those character types that were defined by speech (“Dissembling,” “Idle Chatter,” “Garrulity,” “Rumor-mongering,” “Griping,” “Slander”), Theophrastus also used speech habits to illustrate “Boorishness” (he talks too loud), “Shamelessness” (“a tolerance for doing and saying shameful things”),3 “Grouchiness” (“If he stumbles on the street, he is apt to curse the stone”), and, best of all, “Bad Taste” (“While eating he relates that he’s drunk some hellebore that cleaned him inside out, and that the bile in his stool was blacker than the soup that is on the table” [Rusten, LCL]). Something as small as a misspoken salutation—saying “Be well!” when the time of day called for “Greetings!”—could cause considerable embarrassment, and might be taken as proof of bad breeding.4

1 So Seneca quotes what he says had become a proverb among the Greeks: *talis hominibus fuit oratio qualis vita* (Ep. 114.1). Quintilian also calls it a Greek saying (Inst. 11.1.30), and Cicero says that it originated with Socrates (Tusc. 5.47). Plutarch said that words—even more than physical traits—reveal character (Cat. Maj. 7.2); cf. Juvenal, Sat. 4.81–83.

2 “Stranger, what I have to say is brief: Stand by and read it too. This is the uncomely catacomb of a comely woman. Her parents named her the name Claudia. Her husband with all her heart she loved. She bore two sons. The one of them she leaves on the earth, the other lies beneath it. *Her speech was charming [sermone lepido],* her gait attractive. She kept the house, she wove the wool. I have spoken. You may go” (CIL. 6.15346 [trans. Brian A. Krostenko, Cicero, Catullus, and the Language of Social Performance (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 71]).

3 Cf. Aristotle, *Magna moralia* 1193a1–2: “Modesty [*míðiôs*] is a mean between shamelessness [*ánaiskhpôs*] and extreme shyness; it concerns both actions and words.”

4 So Lucian in *A Slip of the Tongue in Greeting.* The whole piece is lighthearted; nevertheless, Lucian says that he was humiliated by his mistake (1); that another person had “almost died for shame” when making similar mistakes (8); and that some would
There were many potential speech errors, and many character flaws they could betray. The Elder Seneca, for instance, believed the youth of his day lacked eloquence because they lacked moral probity. In an epistle on the connection between speech and life, the Younger Seneca concurs: “Exactly as each individual man’s actions seem to speak, so people’s style of speaking [genus dicendi] often reproduces the general character of the time, if the morale of the public has relaxed and has given itself over to effeminacy. Wantonness in speech is proof of public luxury [argumentum est luxuriae publicae orationis lascivia]” (Ep. 114.2 [Gummere, LCL]). Although Seneca names lascivia here, his concern is not with indecent topics or words, but rather with a lax, unmanly style. To demonstrate the correlation between life and language, Seneca reviews the moral failings of Maecenas and then quotes several of his lines. What is objectionable in the writings is their “misleading word order” and “inverted” and “nerveless” expression (Ep. 114.8). Similarly, the philosopher Demonax claimed he could detect something effeminate and ill-bred in Favorinus’s “laxity of rhythm.”

In general, foul language—whether used in humorous abuse, casual conversation, or erotic discussions—was contrasted with nobility, self-restraint, high-mindedness, and high social status. A second-century A.D. rhetorical treatise from Oxyrhynchus embodies this general impression: “Take no pleasure saying anything obscene or reckless, for that is mean and comes from a dissolute character; on the contrary, avoiding foul language is high-minded and is an ornament of speech.” Since people of high social status frequently claimed special moral gravity, certain sorts of jokes or erotic writings were thought inappropriate for their character. On the other hand, it was precisely these people who had the education and leisure to compose texts that they might also find themselves forced to defend.

Turning first to the views about humor, it is clear that lower forms of joking, especially those that used obscene words or themes, were associated with a lack of moral seriousness or upper-class refinement. Plato warned that anyone who regularly entered into those battles of...