Introduction

In 1753, the Scottish minister James Fordyce (1720–1796) published his *Essay on the Action Proper for the Pulpit*, a tract on the bodily eloquence, the *pronuntiatio* or *actio*, of preachers. Surprisingly, one of the models held up by the reverend is St Paul preaching in the Athenian court of the Agora—or rather Raphael’s celebrated portrayal of the event. Fordyce notes admiringly how through his animated countenance and his lofty bearing and gestures the apostle held his audience in thrall. As he writes:

> None will wonder at the silent, deep Attention and Rapture, which appear in St Paul’s Hearers at Athens, who considers that truly Divine Orator, as he is there drawn by the Painter, looking with such a Face of Inspiration and impetuous Ardour, and seeming to pour forth a whole Tempest of sacred Eloquence, accompanied with the boldest and most majestic Action it is possible to imagine (Fig. 1).1

In the early modern period Raphael’s mastership remained unchallenged. Though the painter Nicolas Poussin once quipped that compared with the Ancients Raphael was an ass (but compared with the moderns an eagle), nearly all artists and art lovers looked up to the master. They lauded him for his knowledge of Antiquity and even more so for bringing it alive, for lending his antique and his biblical figures, like St Paul, both grandness and humanity. He was the Renaissance artist par excellence.

Yet Fordyce’s take on Raphael was new. He commended his *Saint Paul Preaching at Athens* because in his representation of the sermon both the

---

apostle and his audience are overcome with emotion and that, in the minister’s view, was what religious oratory was about. A sermon should be emotionally contagious, and it was only the preacher’s emotions manifesting themselves through his body—through his voice, eyes, gestures and bearing—that could work such contagion.

The Scottish Presbyterian minister was one of the first theoreticians of what Paul Goring has described as the ‘sentimentalisation’ of delivery, its mid-eighteenth-century break into sentiment and sensibility. More than on their rational faculties, a preacher should work on the believers’ emotional faculties, on their sentiments and sensibility. Indeed, to touch their hearts he should first cultivate an appropriate state of feeling. The preacher should be moved himself by the emotions he intended to release among the faithful.² It was this new, affective oratory that Fordyce believed he could recognize in Raphael’s limning of St Paul.

² P. Goring, The Rhetoric of Sensibility in Eighteenth-Century Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); see also H. Roodenburg, “From Embodying the Rules