CHAPTER 2

Audience Reaction, Performance and the Exploitation of Delivery in the Courts and Assembly

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Introduction

The similarities between performance in the theatre and in the law courts and Assembly have been well studied. All three venues were quite different in what they represented and what an audience expected—no one was actually on trial in a theatre, even though trials formed part of the plots of both tragedies and comedies, and while domestic and foreign affairs were often an integral part of a forensic speech, no judge when casting his vote knew that he was influencing his city’s public policy. Despite the differences in what these three venues were about, there is the one common denominator of the performer—the actor on stage, the politician on the bēma and the prosecutor or the defendant before the judges. It has been rightly concluded that the orator in court or in the Assembly was often as much an actor as his professional counterpart on stage—nothing has changed over the centuries, as Reagan’s famous quip, “How can a president not be an actor?”, testifies. Performance mattered, something ancient critics made clear. Thus Dionysius of Halicarnassus, like Aristotle in Rh. 3.12 and Demetrius in Eloc. 271, argued that debate and especially delivery, which included intonation, gesture, gaze and movement—in other words, acting—were essential parts of political and forensic speeches.

Performance and delivery were arguably so inextricably linked that they were even synonymous, with both involving all aspects of how a speech was given to, and especially received by, its audience. In this chapter, I focus on the means of delivery that speakers used to exploit their audience’s reaction in the court or the Assembly for the optimum rhetorical effect. Given the importance

* I am very grateful to the conference convenors, Andreas Serafim and Beatrice da Vela, for inviting me to give the keynote address at what was a hugely enjoyable, fruitful and successful conference, and for the comments of the editors of this volume on a draft of this essay. Remaining errors are of course my own.

attached to performance, it is easy to understand why Demosthenes’ early political speeches on fiscal and foreign policy, including the first Philippic of 351, all failed: not so much because of what he advocated or his ignorance of the subject matter—the reverse in fact since he spoke sensibly and in an informed manner on such matters—but because of convoluted and overly rhetorical arguments that a listening audience could not follow and a poor delivery. He was booed and heckled while speaking, almost costing him a political career, as a section in his speech 13 indicates.

Then Demosthenes’ chance meeting with an actor—either the comedic Satyrus or tragic Andronicus—changed everything. The orator was already overcoming the shortness of breath and weak voice that had plagued him until then, but more importantly the actor’s tutelage caused Demosthenes to change his style and delivery to the extent that Dionysius later called his strong and forcible style “the most perfect form of oratory.” Moreover, Demosthenes attached the most importance in performance not to simply speaking well but to delivery or acting—thus when he was asked what he thought was the first thing in oratory, he replied “Delivery”; what was the second, “Delivery”, and what was the third, “Delivery.”

Demosthenes’ delivery and especially his forcefulness would propel him to great political influence. His extant political speeches demonstrate that he employed the same sorts of rhetorical techniques and levels of theatricality as in forensic speeches—although he was quick to introduce novel elements where he could. For example, in 344 Philip II of Macedonia proposed changes to the Peace of Philocrates of 346 that Demosthenes saw would be to Athens’ detriment. Apart from Aeschines and a handful of other men, the Athenians generally distrusted Philip, which attitude Demosthenes naturally exploited

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2 Plu. Dem. 6.3, with Worthington (2013) 37–39; also: Pearson (1975) 95–109. Plutarch is admittedly drawing on earlier writers, and the anecdotes to overcome his speech deficiencies and delivery style may have been part of a later peripatetic tradition to elevate his reputation to show how he struggled: Cooper (2000) 224–245. Demosthenes later switched to a simpler style (and delivery?) better suited to a listening audience: Worthington (2013) 88.


4 Satyrus: Plu. Dem. 7.1–5; Andronicus: [Plu.] Mor. 845a–b, Phot. 265 p. 493b, Suda, delta 456, with Roisman, Worthington, Waterfield (2015) 222–223, on the different actors in the same anecdote. The point to be emphasised is that it was an actor who took Demosthenes under his wing.

5 Is. 20. Similar sentiments were also expressed in Cic. Brut. 35 and Quint. 10.1.76; see too Cooper (2004) passim.

6 [Plu.] Mor. 845b; also: Plu. Dem. 7.1–5, Suda, delta 456.