

COMMENTATIONES AD RECENTIOREM LATINITATEM SPECTANTES

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“OPUS ORATORIUM”. BETWEEN RHETORIC AND ACTING IN THE MIDDLE AGES

ABSTRACT. Bering Piotr, “Opus oratorium”. Between rhetoric and acting in the Middle Ages.

THE following article deals with a possibility of finding some parallels between oratory art and staging. They are often hidden in a text structure, but also an old practice allows us to point many similarities between both arts. Some ancient, medieval treatises were chosen for the further analysis.

Keywords: Poetics, middle ages, rhetoric, oratory, acting

A large number of scholars¹ have tried to examine a phenomenon of the mutual relation between oratory and stage action. The first evidence of such research can doubtlessly be found in the antiquity. Some pieces of advice for orators, which are very close to the stage practice can be found in several treatises on rhetoric. It should be emphasized that the authors of rhetorical works have never focused their main interests on the relation between staging and rhetorical action. It may be described as “by-product” of scientific activity.

In the beginning I try to examine works of Roman rhetors, which were written for students of rhetoric preparing for own career or even for acting rhetors. These circumstances caused that the authors of works pay their attention mainly to practical questions. I do hope that an analysis of these sources can also provide to us some important information on the staging. I should point there out,

¹Among interesting and inspiring works I pay attention to: Bonner 1949, Gunderson 2003, also: Brogi-Bercoff 1985, 1998. Some aspects of metatheatre, which can be also useful for studies about rhetoric and theatre are analyzed by Świontek 1999 and Ruta-Rutkowska 2010.

that historians of an ancient theatre very seldom examine the rhetorical works. In their opinion these kinds of sources do not broaden our knowledge of material theatrical world².

Contrary to Antiquity, many pictures, handbooks for confessors or simple notes in city documents come from Middle Ages. There is a noticeable lack of medieval works devoted to staging. Contemporary scholars must search with great effort for the smallest evidence of the theoretical notion of staging in medieval poetics³. Klementyna Glińska tries to find a common ground between medieval staging and medieval theory of literature (what simply means rhetorical works and *poetriae*) (Glińska 2011A: 75–99).

Nowadays, the scholars analyse a relation between the literature (or written word) and the theatre (or spoken word) using methods based on the semiotics and the intertextuality. There has been a fundamental question arisen, if is it possible to find a “common denominator” between various – old and contemporary theories, examine relation between the literature and the theatre⁴. Fortunately, many researchers understand old poetics and ancient rhetoric as a theory of literature⁵. Due to these circumstances it is allowed to compare theoretical works coming from different epochs.

Another common ground between an oratory and a performance is any kind of gesture. It is (rather must be) widely used in a rhetorical practice. Remarkably the classical Latin had rather small amount of words related to the gesture. The main notion is simple *gestus*, *-us*, which has a variety of meaning. *Gestum* means quite different things: it designates the past action. The plural form is *gesta*, which is almost an equivalent of Greek *prāxis*. To make a situation even more complicated *gesta* in the Middle Ages was the name of literary genre (*Gesta regis, episcopus, abbatis*) (Schmidt 2006: 31–32).

The other notion related to the gesture is *motus*, very often combined with *corpus* – *motus corporis*. A person doing gestures was named *gesticularius*, what means ‘acting mime’. *Gesticulatio* had entirely negative value, because it was related to overacting. In a very popular and widely commented anonymous book *Rhetorica ad Herennium* we find the following warning: “in gestu nec venustatem conspiciendam nec turpitudinem esse, ne aut histriones aut operarii videamur esse” (3,26). Almost the same words were used by Godfridus de Vinsuaf

²See in Polish science: Kocur 2005. Unfortunately the author analyzed rhetorical works in a superficial way.

³The handbooks for confessors were deeply analyzed by Nicoll 1958. Polish scholars examined medieval chronicles: Targosz 1980: 143–152, Wiesiołowski 2006, Gacka 2011: 51–74 use medieval poetics as a main source for research on theatrical elements.

⁴See more on this topic: Litteraria 2008. This issue is entirely devoted to adapting of modern theories for searching of an old literature.

⁵See more on this topic: Lichański 1992, Kopperschmidt 1990 and particularly emphasized theoretical questions: Gindin 1990.

in 12th Century: “Ne gestus noster sit gestus histrionis vel operarii, similiter et vox et vultus”⁶.

The last advice contains two other notions: *vox* (voice) and *vultus* (a face expression), which were commonly used during the Middle Ages. *Incessus* (step), *nutus*, *signum* belong to the same group and indicate a sign given with gesture. The last notion used in books for orators is related generally to man’s posture: *habitus* (Schmidt 2006: 32–33).

At a first glance we can state, that the same notions describe also an action done by actors. It is not a mistake. Both activities - the oratory and the staging have common roots and similar goals. In the 20th century a German choreograph invented a way to notice a human’s body movement graphically. So called “Laban’s notation” was partially replaced by Movement Evaluation Graphics (Balme 2002: 146–147).

The ancient, early Christian and medieval writers evaluated also a moral value of gestures. The main virtue was *modestia*, which meant an internal order represented by external behaviour. Gesture and step belonged to the most important signs of human harmony. Here was required an observance of Cicero’s words “mediocritas optima est” (Cic. *Off.* I, 130; Schmidt 2006: 36–37).

The ancient rhetors had also a main idea of playing with human body. In the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* there are listed some types of body performing:

Motus est corporis gestus et vultus moderatio quaedam quae probabiliora reddit ea quae pronuntiantur. Convenit igitur in vultu pudorem et acrimoniam esse, in gestu nec venustatem conspiciendam nec turpitudinem esse, ne aut histriones aut operarii videamur esse. Ad easdem igitur partes in quas vox est distributa motus quoque corporis ratio videtur esse adcommo-
danda. Nam si erit sermo cum dignitate, stantis in vestigio, levi dexterae motu, loqui oportebit, hilaritate, tristitia, mediocritate vultus ad sermonis sententias adcommodata. Sin erit in demonstratione sermo, paululum corpus a cervicibus demittemus; nam est hoc datum ut quam proxime tum vultum admoveamus ad auditores si quam rem docere eos et vehementer instigare velimus. Sin erit in narratione sermo, idem motus poterit idoneus esse qui paulo ante demonstrabatur in dignitate. Sin in iocatione, vultu quandam debimus hilaritatem significare sine commutatione gestus. (*Rhet. Herr.*, 3, 26)

(Physical movement consists in a certain control of gesture and mien which renders what is delivered more plausible. Accordingly the facial expression should show modesty and animation, and the gestures should not be conspicuous for either elegance or grossness, lest we give the impression that we are either actors or day labourers. It seems, then, that the rules regulating bodily movement ought to correspond to the several divisions of tone comprising voice. To illustrate: (1) For the Dignified Conversational Tone, the speaker must stay in position when he speaks, lightly moving his right hand, his countenance expressing an emotion corresponding to the sentiments of the subject—gaiety or sadness or an emotion intermediate. (2) For the Explicative Conversational Tone, we shall incline the body forward a little from the

⁶In his treatise *Documentum de modo et arte dictandi et versificandi* (2,3,170). This passage was analyzed by Glińska 2011B: 41–54.

shoulders, since it is natural to bring the face as close as possible to our hearers when we wish to prove a point and arouse them vigorously. (3) For the Narrative Conversational Tone, the same physical movement as I have just set forth for the Dignified will be appropriate. (4) For the Facetious Conversational Tone, we should by our countenance express a certain gaiety, without changing gestures).

It seems that the same rules can be adopted for actors. What is striking, it is a strict order to avoid any form of overacting. The reason is banal: the Roman comedies were very often played with help of very intense gesture (Skwara 2001: 206, Bieber 1961: 161). What is suitable in comedies should be avoided in oratory.

Moreover, a rhetor is obliged to modify own gestures, voice and clothes to any particular situation. It is also mentioned the necessity of proper adjustment own emotions and a state of mind. Such instructions are elementary level of staging. Cicero wrote also that in some particular cases actors can be a good pattern for young rhetors: “Intuendi nobis sunt non solum oratores, sed etiam actores, ne mala consuetudine ad aliquam deformatitem pravitamque veniamus” (Cic., *De orat.* I 156). Unfortunately this sentence is quite ambiguous, because it remains unclear if the actors are a good or rather a bad example.

It should be emphasized, that ancient rhetors were very concerned on the strict observance of *decorum* rules. It was almost unimaginable for them to break even the smallest rule.

The same rules and restrictions remained for many centuries. Medieval *poetriae* have adapted ancient patterns with only slight modifications. Some rules were even stricter, than in Antiquity. We can notice the same phenomenon, like in Roman theatre: the Passions plays, moralities and farces were performed with a wide variety of intense gesture. The official speeches should be moderate and reserved.

John of Garland in his *Parisiana Poetria* was not mainly interested in an orator's gesture. In a short description of tragedy's features he annotated the importance of it in one of scenes: “Hiis gestis, tegimen secreti, sista tegendi, // Larua doli, celerum thalamus, nox implicat orbem” (*Parisiana Poetria* VII 103–104). The writer is aware of a proper using of gesture in theatre, but he presumably knows nothing about a gesture in the oratory speech.

Now there has been another question arisen. If oratory and staging on one hand are so similar, but on the other so many differences remain between them, would be possible to use an oratory on the stage? The answer is positive: yes, it is possible. There are two presuppositions. The first one is given by Cicero and Quintilian. Both (especially the latter) used notions *actio* and *pronuntiatio* almost in synonymous way.

Pronuntiatio a plerisque actio dicitur, sed prius nomen a voce, sequens a gestu videtur accipere. Namque actionem Cicero alias “quasi sermonem”, alias “eloquentiam quandam cor-

poris” dicit. Idem tamen duas eius partis facit, quae sunt eadem pronuntiationis, vocem atque motum: quapropter utraque appellatione indifferenter uti licet (Quint., *Inst.* XI,3,1)

(Delivery is often styled action. But the first name is derived from the voice, the second from the gesture. For Cicero in one passage speaks of action as being a form of speech, and in another as being a kind of physical eloquence. None the less, he divides action into two elements, which are the same as the elements of delivery, namely, voice and movement. Therefore, it matters not which term we employ.) (Butler)

Est enim actio quasi corporis quaedam eloquentia, cum constet e voce atque motu. (Cic., *Orat.* 56)

It seems, that the terminology did not play any important role for ancient rhetors. It is rather difficult to define a borderline between *actio* and *pronuntiatio*. It should be mentioned that the ancient and medieval rhetors have written their works for orators but not for actors⁷.

The second presupposition comes from one of Polish medieval chronicles. So called *Kronika Galla Anonima* (*Chronicle of Gallus Anonymus*) presents a literary genre *gesta*⁸. The main hero is Bolesław Krzywousty, Polish prince. His history should be publicly announced, similar to public lecture of lives of saints and histories of others kings and knights. Our chronicler with a short poem elucidates own goals. The ending words are: “De cuius gestis scribere//Iam tempus est insistere”⁹. At a first glance, the chronicler favours a written word. But is it a real goal or only a rhetorical ornament?¹⁰

In a long introduction to the third part of his work the author often uses a word *recitare*:

Et sicut vitas sanctorum et passiones religiosum est in ecclesiis predicare, ita gloriosum est in scolis vel in palatiis regum ac ducum triumphos vel victorias recitare. Et sicut vite sanctorum vel passiones ad religionem mentes fidelium instruunt in ecclesiis predicate, ita militie vel victorie regum atque ducum ad virtutem militum animos accendunt, in scolis vel in capitoliis recitate. [...] Constat ergo ex hiis superius approbatis rebus gestis Polonorum principum (non) in vacuum recitatis, constat quoque vestro iudicio confirmandum, vero presens opus interpreti recitandum (III, Epist.)

⁷ Remarkably the orators and modern scholars compare the oratory (and orators) to a comedy and *histriones* and do not try to compare with others theatrical genres (esp. a tragedy). See also Glińska 2011B: 45–46.

⁸ The article by Guttner-Sporzyński 2010 can be used as a good introduction for this topic. From newer Polish contributions to Gall-Studies the following works should be mentioned: Jasiński 2008, Wenta 2011, Banaszkiwicz 2008. A special attention should be given to an article written by Mühle 2009 which briefly summarizes a contemporary discussion among Polish scholars for foreign readers.

⁹ I, Epil.; I have used probably the best edition: Anon., *Chr.*: 6.

¹⁰ Each medieval chronicler knew the basic rules of *ars dictandi*. See more on principles of *ars dictandi* Michałowska 2007: 146–182.

We should remember, how ambiguous a Latin word *recitare*¹¹ is. Moreover, some peculiar Latin words *non in vacuum recitare* since many decades have started a heated debate over the topic among Polish scholars. Even if a courageous hypothesis of a public “staging” of written text from chronicle formulated by Karolina Targosz (Targosz 1980: 154–172) might be accepted, still it is unclear how this text was performed. Witold Wojtowicz has tried using a *memoria* category and a notion of “theatre of memory” for an interpretation of a literary communication used by the author¹². This procedure builds a kind of a bridge between the analyses focused on a literary aspects and the efforts concerning an oral (perhaps semitheatrical) structure of analyzed chronicle. The performed orality (Ong 2001) and the acting have many similarities. Both kinds of communication try to gain a listener for sender’s ideas and values. This “common denominator” was noticed and analyzed by the authors cited above. Fragments from their works have been known among many ancient and medieval writers.

If we come back to the “mysterious” word *recitare*, there are possible numerous interpretations. K. Targosz understands *recitare* as an act of public performing (Targosz 1980: 155–156). W. Wojtowicz explains often this verb as ‘saying’ and makes point, that this chronicle was composed as a written work, possible for private reading (Wojtowicz 2013: 8–12, 26). On the other hand medieval texts contain many traces of orality and it is relatively easy to transform them into a vivid speech¹³.

It seems that an oratory speech with some gesture is more appropriate than other – mainly vivid – theatrical forms. A court is virtually natural place for this activity. A literary output of Provençal and French troubadours¹⁴, acting in different aristocratic courts is widely known. But any analysis of performing techniques, which can be used in Polish court deserves a separate paper.

To sum up: we cannot precisely elucidate the mutual relations between the oratory art and acting. But there is noticeable awareness of that relation, equally as in written theoretical works, as in practical pieces of advice for orators and performers. This tradition lasted long time and perhaps the most flourishing period for it was late Renaissance and Baroque (Brogi-Bercoff 1985, 1998).

¹¹ Cf. Plezia 1998, (vol. IV, 464), Forcellini 1940, (vol. IV, 28), Du Cange 1863, (vol. VII, 46), Niermeyer 2001: 183 (sub voce *citare*).

¹² Wojtowicz 2009: 337–347; Wojtowicz 2013: 20–30; see also: Liman 1973, Michałowska 1998: 49–58.

¹³ Many exhaustive examples presents Dąbrowka 2004: 245–261.

¹⁴ *Brewiarz*, Bec 1986, Gaunt-Marshall 2005.

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„OPUS ORATORIUM“. ZWISCHEN DER RHETORIK
UND DER SCHAUSPIELKUNST IM MITTELALTER

Z u s a m m e n f a s s u n g

Seit langer Zeit versuchen die Forscher die Beziehungen zwischen der Rhetorik und der Schauspielkunst zu enthüllen. Aus der Antike stammen die Hinweise für Redner, wie sie sich vor einem Publikum benehmen sollten. Nicht selten raten die großen Oratoren die Schauspieler nachzuahmen. Der große Unterschied bildet die Intensität der Gestik oder der Aussprache; was an der Bühne akzeptabel ist, darf nicht in der Redekunst existieren. Die antiken Gebote wurden im Mittelalter weiter angewandt und in *Poetriae* definiert. Es besteht die Frage, ob diese theoretischen Vorschriften in der literarischen und szenischen Praxis benutzt wurden. Manche Textpassage aus den mittelalterlichen Chroniken und vor allem die Elegienkomödien scheinen es, eine mögliche Benutzung der obigen Vorschriften zu beglaubigen.