

# The Masculine Ideal of “the Race that Wears the Toga”

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Naturalistic and expressive portraiture is considered one of the great achievements of Roman art. Yet such Roman honorific portraits as the Naples *Claudius* (fig. 1), its athletic nude body of heroic type surmounted by the jowly visage of the aging gourmand, will get a laugh from most audiences today. The comedy proceeds from an aesthetic disjunction, perceived since Winckelmann, between portrait head, conceived as Roman, and ideal body, conceived as Greek. Only this modern aesthetic, supported by the continuing prestige of Greek male nude statuary, allows assertions like that of R. R. R. Smith, that Roman nude portraits are a covert revenge of enslaved Greek sculptors on their barbarian masters.<sup>1</sup> That Roman elite men could be commemorated to their own satisfaction in statues like the *Claudius* implies conceptions of ideal masculine bodies fundamentally different from our own. But later Body Beautiful ideologies are so naturalized in our aesthetic experience that most interpreters of the Roman heroic male nude take refuge in iconography. The nude body is merely an iconographic attribute of the individual really represented in the portrait head. It signifies a cultural position, such as espousal of Greek political or merely literary culture; or a role, such as Hellenistic ruler or divine autocrat; or it symbolizes a virtuous aspect of character.<sup>2</sup> Such coherent and serious messages would preclude or supersede perception of aesthetic incoherence.

This essentially modernist separation of form from content finds justification in Roman claims that art is valued only for its moral meaning.<sup>3</sup> Iconography is indeed crucial to the honorific message of any Roman portrait. Still, for most interpreters, iconography has allowed a certain avoidance of the very question heroic nudes most obviously pose to modern eyes. That is, what are the Roman conceptions of elite male bodies that could foster this type of honorific statuary? Because Roman elders with the faces of the portrait heads would not naturally have

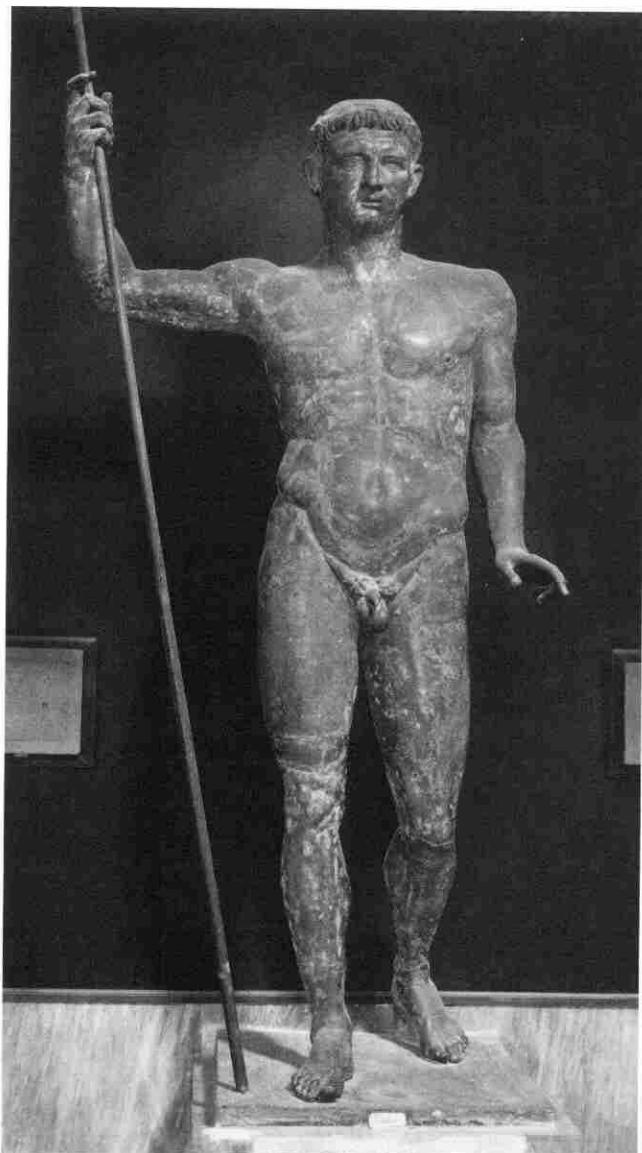


FIG. 1 *Claudius*, 41–54 C.E., bronze, 96 inches high. Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples.

heroic bodies of their own, the acknowledged peculiarity of Greek practice and representation of elite male nudity<sup>4</sup> makes it easy to take for granted that Romans in need of heroic bodies would apply Greek ones. But was there a Roman Body Beautiful, or a coherent Roman body of any kind, behind these statuary manifestations of an “appendage aesthetic,”<sup>5</sup> these agglomerations of disparate signifying parts?

To approach this question it will be useful to turn to other honorific types that offer access to shared attitudes to the constitution and representation of elite male persons. The Roman toga statue is particularly revealing because it displays a man with the explicit attribute of Roman manhood, the *toga virilis*. Being a man, *vir*, among the Romans was not a natural consequence of bodily gender but required civic recognition. A Roman citizen boy, within a few years after puberty, would celebrate legal majority by assuming the plain white *toga pura* and, accompanied by family, clients, and friends, proceeding to inscription in the citizen census and a sacrifice on the Capitol.<sup>6</sup> The *toga virilis* signified a bodily state: sexually capable and male; but also a Roman citizen body, a normative political construct for which male sexual maturity was only the first prerequisite.

Hence, the toga was a suggestive vehicle for Augustus’s programmatic “restoration” of ancestral customs. The *toga virilis*, forbidden to noncitizens, required of citizens, and capable of further status refinements through color, borders, or drape, demonstrated in the public assemblies of Rome the ideal order, the ideal solidarity, and the definitive virtues of citizens.<sup>7</sup> Requiring citizens to wear the toga in the Forum, Augustus reportedly cited his own court poet, Virgil, identifying the Romans as “masters of affairs, the togate race,” to whom Jupiter promises eternal world dominion.<sup>8</sup> Surviving toga statues, rare before the mid-first century B.C., show that the genre grew popular, with the statuary habit in general, from the time of Augustus.<sup>9</sup> Nat-

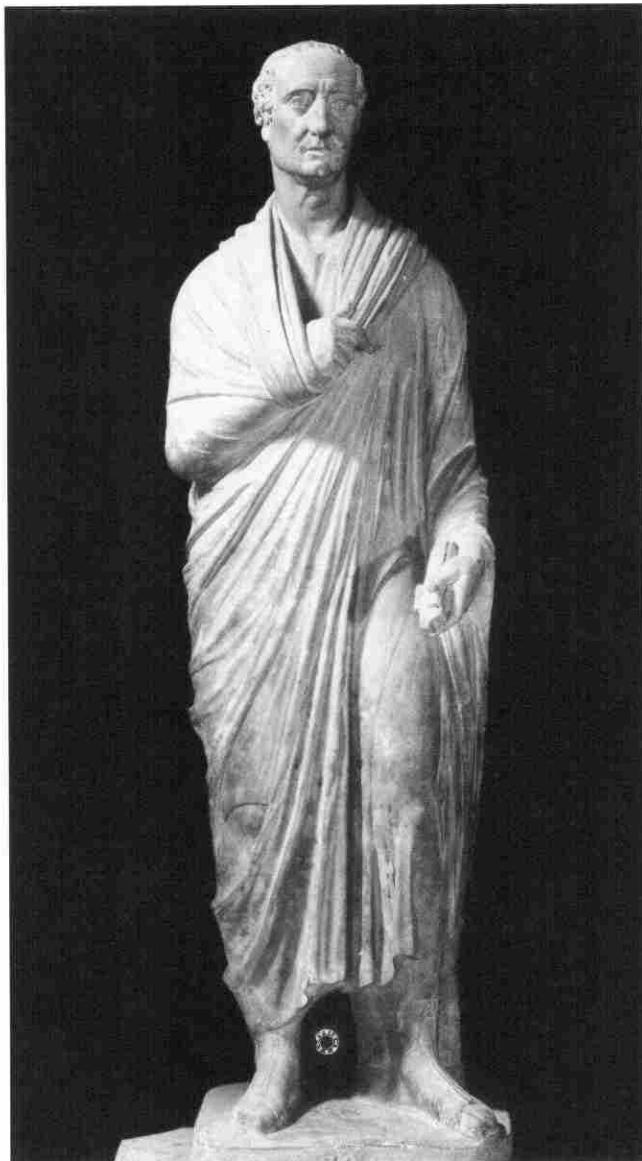


FIG. 2 “Marius,” first century B.C.E., marble, 64 inches high. Musei Capitolini, Rome.

urally, they have been interpreted in the light of Augustan citizenship ideology.

The statues at first seem only to confirm the absence from representation of Roman elite male bodies. Already in the first century B.C. many of the earliest preserved examples show a technically explicit head-body disjunction. Like the “Marius” (fig. 2), they were composed of togate body blanks with a deep socket between the shoulders for insertion of a portrait head (on the “Marius,” a modern substitution). The “Marius,” shows a typical irresolute *contrapposto* swathed in the half-round toga draped over both shoulders and bunched around the neck to form a sling high on the chest for the bent right arm, like a Greek pallium. Many such statues are from funerary contexts. And both full-length and bust funerary portraits in freedman tombs favor the same quiet pose and pallium-type toga, understood as a proud emblem of the citizen sta-

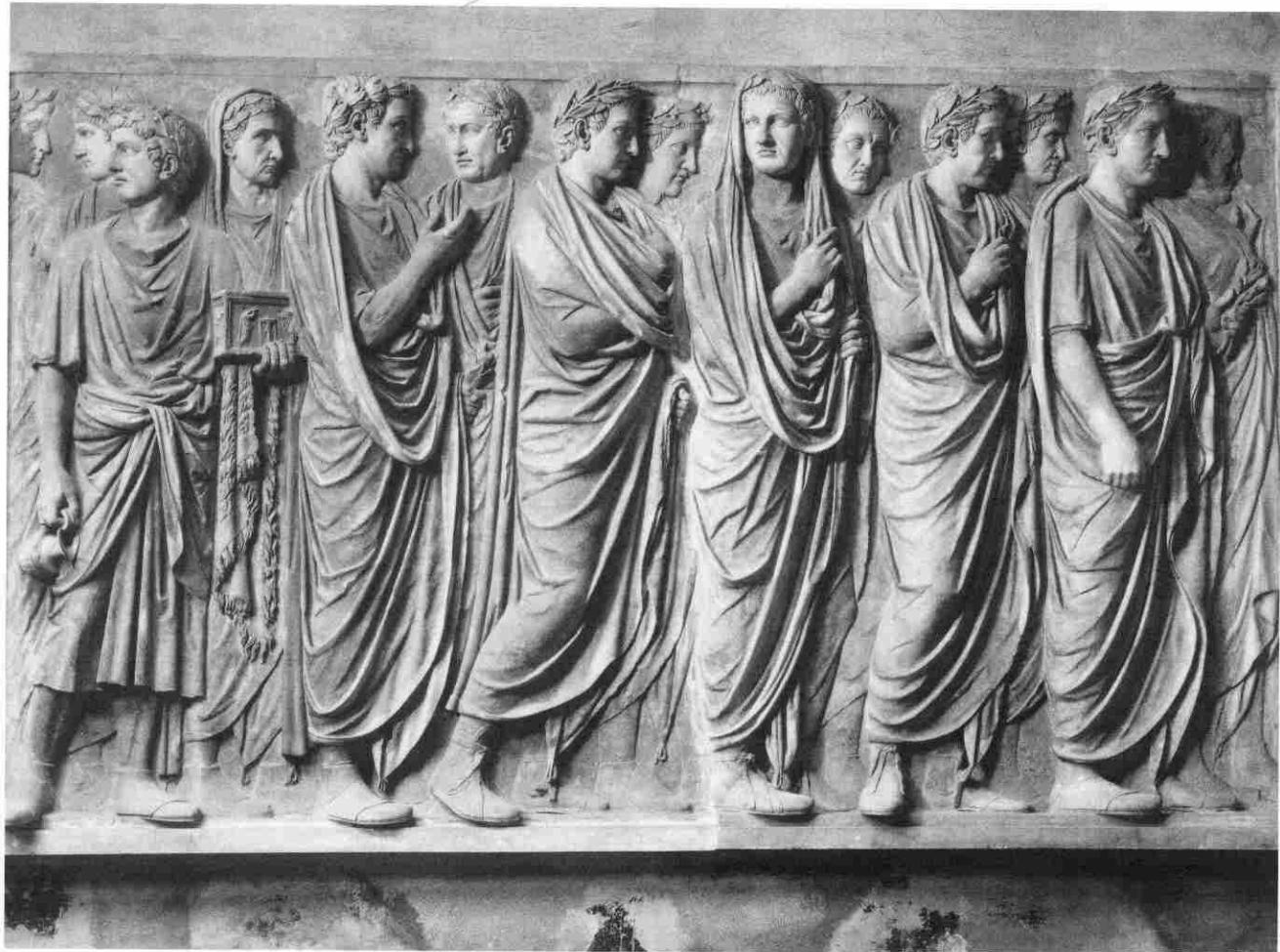


FIG. 3 *Ara Pacis Augustae* (north frieze detail), 13–9 B.C.E., marble, 5 feet 3 inches x 35 feet. Museum of the Ara Pacis, Rome.

tus gained with liberation from slavery.<sup>10</sup> Statues like the “*Marius*” represent men of an economic and administrative elite who were yet only recent citizens and not eligible for the traditional equestrian and senatorial offices. But Diana and Fred Kleiner identified the drapery pattern of the “*Marius*” in multiple copies, not attributable to the same makers. Hence they suggested a famous public model behind at least some of the freedman portraits.<sup>11</sup> It seems that newly Roman freedmen (usually of Greek culture) could borrow a standard Roman body.

Similarly, the increasing size and complexity of drape of the toga during the same Augustan period can be seen as confirmation of the prudery of the Roman ideology of ancestral Republican virtue. The first, third, and fifth foreground *togati* on the illustrated segment of the north frieze of the *Ara Pacis Augustae* (fig. 3) wear the *sinus*, a narrower half-oval applied to the long straight edge of the toga and worn folded over concentrically.<sup>12</sup> The senator with veiled head may illustrate a reason for this invention: extra fabric that can be used for the veil of sacrifice precludes the need to hitch up the toga from the back.<sup>13</sup> But if the *sinus* was originally for sacrificial dress, it quickly

became more common and larger, as the toga also became longer. Statues like the mid-first-century *M. Calatorius* (fig. 4), from the theater at Herculaneum, support a narrative of “concealing draperies,” of the toga progressively “dematerializ[ing] the body while it creates the iconic image of civil status,”<sup>14</sup> as if the body were only an impediment to the civic honors memorialized in the toga statue.

The relationship of the body to male public achievement was more complex. A closer look at the toga statues also shows that although they remain stereotypical and continue to be made as interchangeable head supports, they do not show togas simply obscuring the body. Toga statues at all periods show a range of bodily articulation. The more complicated drapery still responds to a bent knee (see fig. 4). The bunched folds of the longer front *lacinia* (the straight edge), falling between the feet, separate the legs. Richer folds may be used to excavate spaces framing parts of the body, as in the *Titus* (fig. 5). Articulation of body parts is often clearer than in the pod-shaped simple surface of many pallium-type statues (see fig. 2). The later drape reveals the tunic belted at the waist and a considerably larger expanse of upper torso than the



FIG. 4 *M. Calatorius*, ca. 25 C.E., bronze. Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples.

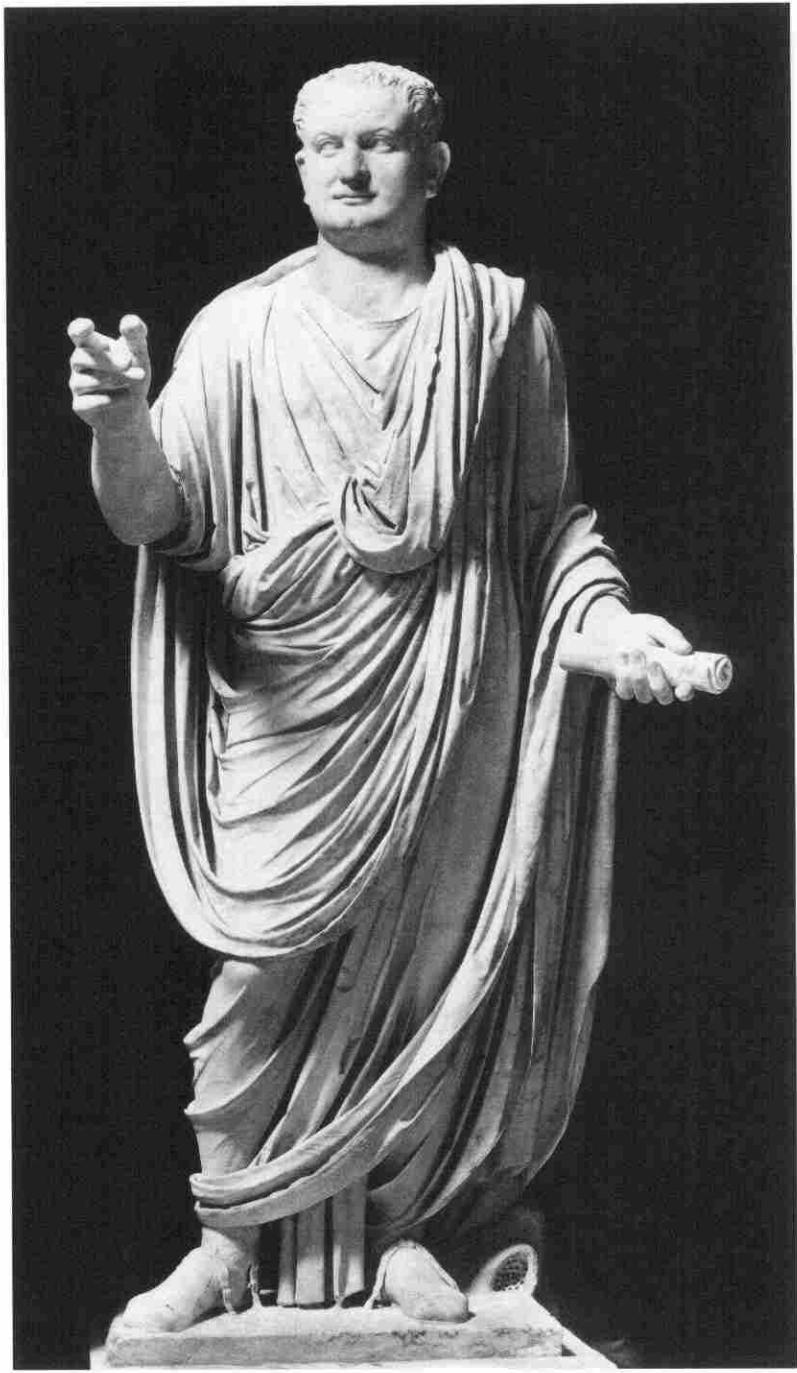


FIG. 5 *Titus*, 79–81 C.E., marble, 78 inches high. Braccio Nuovo, Musei Vaticani, Vatican State.

tiny glimpse of neck edge the pallium-type affords. This is not because the different drape leaves the right arm free, for the few early depictions of the diagonal drape, such as the *Aulus Metellus*, also show a much smaller triangular wedge of the torso. On the other hand, diagonal drape of the early toga bared the whole right shoulder. The *sinus* of the imperial toga covers more of the shoulder, balanced precariously along its top and framing the right arm.

Both the precarious shoulder fold and the greater length of *lacinia* only incidentally cover more of the body. Primarily, they make motion more difficult, perhaps emphasizing an ideal citizen's freedom from physical labor.<sup>15</sup> Although the pose of the "Marius" (see fig. 2) is passive and the toga drape contained, the short hem does not encumber the legs and the right arm could be freed for action by a simple tug at the neckline. *M. Calatorius* (see fig. 4), by contrast, could not extend his step without dragging at the hem passing over his left wrist. He could not move his right arm above the elbow without threatening the shoulder fold. And if that fold of the *sinus* were to fall, it could loosen the *balteus* (the rolled straight edge carried diagonally across the body from below the right arm to the left shoulder), so that it no longer secured the *umbo* (the stretch of front *lacinia* pulled up and draped over it). The *lacinia*, already reaching the instep when properly draped, would drag between the feet, menacing a stumble.

The mad emperor Caligula reportedly fell to just this hazard, rushing out of a theater in a rage.<sup>16</sup> Extreme motions caused by irrational temper resulted in an unseemly, and possibly dangerous, toga debacle. For the Romans, "every motion of the soul has its natural appearance, voice and gesture."<sup>17</sup> That bad toga-wearing characterizes a bad emperor places the imperial toga among the accoutrements of the bodily demonstration of virtue that was the Roman cult of decorum. First-century honorific statues show increasing convolution of the toga as a consciously difficult device for displaying aristocratic self-control through restraint of bodily motion.

At the same time, statuary depictions deploy the voluminous imperial toga to emphasize certain body parts within a rhythmic pattern. Richard Brilliant noticed the organization of stance and the repetitive folds of *balteus*, *sinus*, the outer curved hems, and the overlapping *umbo* to present the "rhetorical" right hand.<sup>18</sup> Relief sculpture of toga wearers, like the senators on the *Ara Pacis* (see fig. 3), shows by contrast just how deliberate the formula of the honorific statue is. As stately as their procession is, the senators pull the *sinus* securely forward over their shoulders,

grasp folds in their hands, and even let their left knees push past the curved front hem, in ways never seen in statuary. In the late first century, the rhetorician Quintilian understood extant toga portraits as commemorations of orators, and orators themselves as ideal citizens in action.<sup>19</sup> His *Institutio oratoria* includes detailed instructions on togas just when a "rhetorical" schema of imperial toga statue reached a height of popularity.<sup>20</sup> Like the statues, he describes bodies not totally concealed, but skillfully restrained and released by the stylized manipulation of togas.

The orator, like any gentleman (including the lover), should wear a toga perfectly clean and cut to fit.<sup>21</sup> A too short toga is a sign of poverty,<sup>22</sup> not even mentioned by Quintilian, who assumes his orator is an advocate speaking in law courts, a monopoly of the patron classes. He gives detailed prescriptions for a shapely drape, especially the way the folds fall at particular parts of the body. The *sinus* should reach to just above the tunic hem, about knee length, slightly longer for those who wear the broad stripe. It should be draped on the shoulder with the edge turned back, but not covering so much of the neck and shoulder that "the garb be made narrow and the dignity which belongs to breadth of chest be lost."<sup>23</sup> The *M. Calatorius* (see fig. 4) and the *Titus* (see fig. 5), a portrait of Quintilian's own imperial pupil, may be physiognomic displays of broad-chested virtue through the proportionate toga,<sup>24</sup> following physiognomic descriptions that often gave "the appearance of men about to speak before a group or assembly . . . orators . . . who carry out the principles of rhetorical training."<sup>25</sup>

But in these principles, action is more important than physiognomy. This may be one reason even imperial statues (see fig. 5) set specific heads on generic bodies. Quintilian describes the advocate's ingratiating first appearance:

*stance erect, feet even and a little apart, or with the left the slightest bit advanced; knees straight, but not strained, shoulders relaxed, expression severe, not sad, dull or languid; the arms should be slightly separated from the sides; . . . (The left arm is to be raised until it makes almost a right angle, over which the borders of the toga should lie divided equally. The best attitude [of the hand] with thumb raised and fingers lightly curved, unless it will be holding a scroll.) . . . the right, now that it is to begin, a little extended beyond the sinus with a most modest gesture, as if watching for the beginning.*<sup>26</sup>

Fritz Graf analyzed the development of that "modest gesture" as an "upper-class dialect of gestures," intended to evoke the approbation of his audience, fundamental to

the essentially emotional task of moving and persuading elite men.<sup>27</sup> “Modesty” refers to the restraint that demonstrates not only the liberal character of the aristocrat but also his “respect and subordination in front of the magistrates of the Republic.”<sup>28</sup> Hence Quintilian prohibits specific excessive gestures, many implying toga errors: the orator should not stand too much on the right foot, not pace about, not straddle his legs (“almost indecent if in motion”). He should gesture primarily with the right hand, never with the left alone, and should not pull the *sinus* up with the right hand to gesture with the left. The right hand should move from left to right, not beyond the shoulders, not above the eyes or, except momentarily at the conclusion of an argument, below the chest, and not thrust out so far that his side is exposed to view.<sup>29</sup>

After all this modesty, symbolic of self-restraint and political self-subordination, Quintilian’s subsequent account of proper toga management unexpectedly amounts to a staged disrobing calibrated to the formal divisions of the speech. When called on to speak, the advocate should rise slowly, arranging the toga, or if necessary even entirely putting it on (see fig. 5). But Quintilian expects the *sinus* to slide from the right shoulder even as the speaker passes from the slow movement of the exordium to the *narratio*. The increasing heat of argument in the later parts of a speech allows, even requires, increasing vehemence of gesture together with casting off of the toga. For instance, the orator must not beat his breast but may touch his chest with the fingertips of a cupped hand, and if he does, “it will not be unbecoming to pull back the toga at the same time.” By part three, the argument and examples, “it is appropriate to cast back the toga from the left shoulder, and even to throw down the *sinus* if it sticks.”<sup>30</sup> And nearing the end, “especially with a following wind of fortune, almost everything is becoming, sweat itself, and fatigue, and more careless dress with the toga loosened and falling down everywhere.”<sup>31</sup> It appears that the cut and drape of the imperial toga were designed to facilitate a Roman “striptease” dramatizing the aristocratic body at its proper work, laboring to please senior men, the judges of an elite “friend” or client.<sup>32</sup> The emperor Titus (see fig. 5) in the toga precariously draped, as if beginning a speech, has himself portrayed, not only as patron advocate of Romans in fact his inferiors, but also as prepared to submit bodily to the judgment of magistrates or juries fictively his superiors and peers.

Delivering a speech is a heroic physical sacrifice like the hard labor of military campaigning.<sup>33</sup> Exposure (though still in the tunic) of the body, which has exhausted

itself in strict observance of all gestures of respect, is a self-subordinating gesture. And if the toga distinguished the citizen elite, shedding it would be a demonstration of social vulnerability that must be carefully framed. This is one reason for Quintilian’s contempt for failure to observe the proper stages of disrobing: “But if the toga falls down when one is beginning or slightly advanced, not replacing it proves him careless, or sluggish or ignorant of how clothes should be worn.”<sup>34</sup> But Quintilian’s strictures on expansive gestures and the exposure that accompanies them suggest also the opposite connotation: presumptuousness, disrespect for authorities, political aggression. One may put on the toga entirely before a public court, but not before a magistrate; to lean toward the opposing advocate is insulting, and to cross to his side lacks modesty; ideal restraint avoids hunching the shoulders, not only subserviently like a slave, but also aggressively like a wrestler.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps this is why the advocate should let the toga fall only when victory seems assured.

If exposing the body can constitute a claim, on the one hand, of self-sacrifice and submission to elite male judgment and, on the other, of disrespect and political presumption, the masculine body itself appears as a field for negotiation and demonstration of submission and domination, primarily within a hierarchy of elite men. How Roman men looked, at each other and to each other, adjudicated claims, made through bodily performances, to political participation and status. How men looked was integral to their success as public men.

But the natural body alone does not reveal its place in the political field definitional of elite Roman manhood. Hence, no doubt, the frequency of scurrilous accusations such as the imputation against Coelius of passive homosexual relations with Catiline. The political *motivation* of such charges has long been obvious. Now clearer is their functional relationship to political meanings of exposure of the elite male body. Cicero defended Coelius’s adherence to Catiline as a political decision he was competent to make, having passed a forum apprenticeship of more than the usual year “for restraint of the arm by the toga.”<sup>36</sup> Graduation from the pallium-type drape signified, not abandonment of the self-restraint hoped for from a newly vested youth at the dangerous age, when “very liable to be at the mercy of the passions of others,”<sup>37</sup> but rather his assumption of full political competence, that is, a masculinity necessarily active.

As the *toga virilis* suggests, the ideal Roman male body was not a fixed natural fact, but a zone of political

contestation and demonstration whose meaning could hardly be represented by static naturalistic body portraiture. Above all, exposure was the culmination of a process, carefully calibrated to the performance of service. Correctness of the process cannot be shown by representing the end result, for too much exposure by itself indicated political aggression. Even in perpetrating the overwhelming effect and self-aggrandizing message of heroic nude statuary, the Roman replacement of the natural body, like the toga not yet disarrayed, preserved, not the vanity or personal modesty of the subject, but his display of physical, hence political, restraint.

## Notes

1. R. R. R. Smith, "Greeks, Foreigners, and Roman Republican Portraits," *Journal of Roman Studies* 71 (1981): 24–38.
2. For example Paul Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), 5–11, 44–47, 230–33, 245–50; Henning Wrede, *Consecratio in formam deorum: Vergöttlichte Privatpersonen in der römischen Kaiserzeit* (Mainz, Germany: Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, 1981).
3. For example, see Cicero on suitable sculpture for his villa, collected and translated in J. J. Pollitt, *Art of Rome, c. 753 B.C.–A.D. 337*, Sources and Documents in the History of Art (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1966), 76–79.
4. Larisa Bonfante, "Nudity as a Costume in Classical Art," *American Journal of Archaeology* 93 (1989): 543–70.
5. Richard Brilliant, *Roman Art from the Republic to Constantine* (London: Phaidon, 1974), 224, describing Etrusco-Italic body representations.
6. Suetonius *De vita Caesarum* 5.2.2; H. H. Scullard, *Festivals and Ceremonies of the Roman Republic* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981), 91–92 and 208–9, on the Liberalia and Iuventalia as common days for the celebration in the time of Cicero. In legal slang, "undressed" (*inwestis*) could stand for "prepubertal" (*impubis*), therefore not legally competent.
7. Hans Rupprecht Goette, *Studien zu römischen Togadarstellungen*, Beiträge zur Erschließung hellenistischer und kaiserzeitlicher Skulptur und Architektur, 10 (Mainz, Germany: Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, 1989–90), 2–10, for cut, color, special forms; Richard Gordon, "The Veil of Power: Emperors, Sacrificers, and Benefactors," in *Pagan Priests: Religion and Power in the Ancient World*, ed. Mary Beard and John North (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990), 201–37; Elizabeth Rawson, "Discrimina Ordinum: the *Lex Julia Theatralis*," *Papers of the British School at Rome* 55 (1987): 83–114.
8. *Aeneid* 1.278–82; Suetonius 1.40.
9. Often assumed to be the oldest and most common honorific type (Zanker, *The Power of Images*, 5–7; Götz Lohusen, *Untersuchungen zur Ehrenstatuen in Rom: Literarische und epigraphische Zeugnisse*, *Archeologica* 35 [Rome: Bretschneider, 1983], 46, following Pliny *Natural History* 34.18–28) but lost statues of early Republican heroes reportedly in this form are of unknown date. Surviving evidence is not earlier than Roman adoption of heroic nudes: Goette, *Studien zu römischen Togadarstellungen*, 20–28, 106–13; Diana E. E. Kleiner and Fred S. Kleiner, "Early Roman Togate Statuary," *Bullettino della Commissione Archeologica Comunale di Roma* 87 (1980–81): 125–33. Emeline Hill Richardson and L. Richardson, Jr., "Ad cohibendum bracchium toga: An Archaeological Examination of Cicero, *Pro Caelio* 5.11," *Yale Classical Studies* 19 (1966): 251–68, includes Etruscan precedents.
10. Paul Zanker, "Grabreliefs römischer Freigelassener," *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts* 90 (1975): 267–315; Diana E. E. Kleiner, *Roman Group Portraiture: The Funerary Reliefs of the Late Republic and Early Empire* (New York: Garland, 1977).
11. Kleiner and Kleiner, "Early Roman Togate Statuary," 128–31; Goette, *Studien zu römischen Togadarstellungen*, 107, now dates the "Marius" to the first half of the first century B.C.
12. I follow Goette (*ibid.*, 3–4, 20–42) on toga design and drape.
13. Richardson and Richardson, "Ad cohibendum bracchium toga," 261.
14. Richard Brilliant, *Gesture and Rank in Roman Art*, Memoirs of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences 14 (1963): 46, 69; also Zanker, *The Power of Images*, 162–65; Lohusen, *Untersuchungen zur Ehrenstatuen*, 46; Goette, *Studien zu römischen Togadarstellungen*, 21 and 121.
15. Gordon, "The Veil of Power," 203, 206, on the sacrificant.
16. Suetonius 4.35.
17. Cicero *De oratore* 3.216, quoted in Fritz Graf, "Gestures and Conventions: The Gestures of Roman Actors and Orators," in *A Cultural History of Gesture*, ed. Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992), 36–58, quotation on 40; E. C. Evans, "Roman Descriptions of Personal Appearance in History and Biography," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 46 (1935): 43–84.
18. *Gesture and Rank*, 69.
19. *Institutio oratoria* 11.3.143, on statuary evidence for fashions of the ancestors; ideal citizenship is all-pervasive, explicit in 12.1; Graf, "Gestures and Conventions,"
20. Although not all toga portraits are orators. The freedmen may be explicitly nonorators, as Cicero interprets their drape (Richardson and Richardson, "Ad cohibendum bracchium toga," 267–68).
21. Quintilian 11.3.137–41 and Ovid *Ars amatoria* 1.503–9 give similar advice. The relationship of private masculine ideals to the public one explored here remains to be explored.
22. Martial *Epigrammata* 11.56, 12.36, 12.70.
23. Quintilian 11.3.141.
24. Measured in arm lengths, rather than standard units: Goette, *Studien zu römischen Togadarstellungen*, 4; the *Titus*, 127.
25. Evans, "Roman Descriptions," 56.
26. 11.3.159 with 11.3.141 and 142.
27. P. 51; Quintilian 11.3.154 on the goals of delivery.
28. Graf, "Gestures and Conventions," 46, also 47.
29. 11.3.106, 109, 112–13, 118, 124–26, 129, 131.
30. 11.3.156, 144, 124, 144.
31. 11.3.147.
32. Graf, "Gestures and Conventions," 44; Gordon, "The Veil of Power," 203, 206.
33. Quintilian 11.3.26, 132.
34. 11.3.149.
35. 11.3.124, 132–33, 83 and 160.
36. Richardson and Richardson, "Ad cohibendum bracchium toga."
37. *Pro Caelio* 4.2.

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