

Gilbert Austin

1753–1837

Like Thomas Sheridan, Gilbert Austin was an Irishman and a graduate of Trinity College, and he also devoted himself to elocution. But unlike Sheridan, Austin distrusted the natural, conversational approach to public speaking. Though the vast bulk of *Chironomia* (1806; excerpted here), his treatise on elocution, presents the views of ancient and modern rhetoricians on the subject, the work is best known for the mechanical system of notation that Austin proposed for recording and choreographing speech performances. Austin was the headmaster of a school for upper-class boys in Dublin, and *Chironomia* was intended as a textbook both for them and for adult professionals, such as lawyers, ministers, and politicians, who needed to use eloquence in their work.

Austin had a number of admirers and imitators, and his book encouraged closer attention to the details of nonverbal communication. Austin is himself following the lead of John Bulwer, whose two treatises on gestures—*Chirologia: or the Natural Language of the Hand* and *Chironomia: or the Art of Manual Rhetoric*, both published in 1644—deal with natural gestures and histrionics in oratory. David Hume, too, had advocated the use of histrionic gesture in public speaking in his essay “On Eloquence” in 1742. But it was Austin’s work that gained public notice. Austin was a member of the Royal Irish Academy (similar to the British Royal Society), and as rhetoric scholar Philippa Spoel has shown, his categorization of gestures in *Chironomia* parallels the era’s other attempts to systematize knowledge scientifically. But Richard Whately articulated the reigning view in 1828, in *Elements of Rhetoric*: “Probably not a single instance could be found of any one who has attained, by the study of any system of instruction that has hitherto appeared, a really good Delivery; but there are many—probably nearly as many as have fully tried the experiment,—who have by this means been totally spoiled.”¹ Whately praises Sheridan and advocates the “natural” method.

Reprinted here are one of a number of examples in *Chironomia* showing how symbols can be used to indicate the delivery of a speech, four of eleven plates of illustrations, and a summary of Austin’s notation system.

Selected Bibliography

Our excerpt is from the facsimile of the first edition of Austin’s *Chironomia; or, A Treatise on Rhetorical Delivery*. First published in 1806, the facsimile is edited by Mary Margaret Robb and Lester Thonssen (Carbondale, 1966). The editors’ introduction provides useful information about Austin, the history of the elocution movement, and the development of the elocution curriculum in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

John Bulwer’s *Chirologia: or the Natural Language of the Hand* and *Chironomia: or the Art of Manual Rhetoric* (1644) have been published together in a corrected edition in the Southern Illinois University Press Landmarks series, edited by James W. Cleary (1974).

¹Richard Whately, *Elements of Rhetoric* (1828: rpt., ed. Douglas Ehninger, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1963), pp. 339–40.

you need
+ check
out both
of these
sources

Little scholarship is devoted specifically to Austin, though he figures prominently in discussions of the history of elocution. G. P. Mohrmann, one of the few exceptions, defends Austin against complaints that he is merely mechanical, in "The Real *Chironomia*" (*Southern Speech Journal* 34 [fall 1968]: 17-27). Philippa Spoel uses Michel Foucault's work on eighteenth-century science to interpret Austin's project in "The Science of Bodily Rhetoric in Gilbert Austin's *Chironomia*" (*Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 28 [fall 1998]: 5-27); she sees a tension in Austin's work between representing the body as a mechanism and emphasizing the importance of persuasion conveyed by emotionally laden gestures. For general studies of elocution, see the headnote on Thomas Sheridan.

From *Chironomia*

SYMBOLS FOR NOTING THE FORCE AND RAPIDITY OR INTERRUPTION OF THE VOICE IN DELIVERY

The symbols are to be marked in the margin near the commencement of the passage which they are to influence.

Symbols

Piano -----
Uniform loudness, or forte -----
Crescendo (as in music) -----
Diminuendo (as in music) -----
Rapid -----
Slow -----
Suspension of the voice,
the break or dash after a word } -----
Long pause, or new paragraph -----
Whisper or monotone -----

Compound Symbols

Piano and slow -----
Piano and quick -----
Loud and slow -----
Loud and quick -----
Monotonous or whisper slow -----
Monotone or whisper quick -----

Compare with page 24 of Steele's *Prosodia Rationalis*.

It is requested to be understood that the various passages, which are marked with the notation, are intended merely to illustrate the foregoing system: and that among the innumerable methods of possible delivery, that which is chosen and represented is to be considered as one method only, how far soever removed from the best. It is one property of this system of notation, that whilst it furnishes the means of recording each person's ideas of gesture, it does not presume to dictate. It is a language, which may be used to express every variety of opinion.

In the portion of Gay's fable of the Miser and Plutus, which is doubly illustrated both by engraved figures¹ and by notation, it has been found necessary to omit in the notation some circumstances, in order to express nothing more than what is seen in the figures, and in others for the same reason to be redundant. Thus the retired hand and also the feet are sometimes noted oftener than absolutely necessary, and some transitions are of necessity omitted. It is hoped, however, that the great pains and attention bestowed upon these illustrations will suffice for the purpose of conveying to the reader a tolerably accurate knowledge of the manner of using the notation.

¹Austin seems to have intended to illustrate some of the positions with drawings, but none accompany the text he refers to here. [Ed.]

For the greater convenience and precision each figure is numbered in the Plate, and referred to accordingly in the following notation.

The perpendicular line—divides the portions of writing which refer to each numeral and figure.

THE MISER AND PLUTUS

Gay²

1. 2. The wind was high, | the window shakes;
R Bvhr — q. | peq n—pdq
a R.2.

3. With sudden start | the miser wakes!
vcq c—vix c |
sRix

4. Along the silent room he stalks;
F pdh ad | plq—
aR2

5. 6. Looks back, | and trembles as he walks!
B vix—vix c | Bvhr tr
sRix

7. Each lock and ev'ry bolt he tries,
vix — —vix c |
aL2

8. In ev'ry creek and corner pries;
shq o— . . . —she i |
aR2

9. Then opes his chest with treasure stor'd,
Bqdq — n |

10. And stands in rapture o'er his hoard:
D Bseq |
Ra

11. But now with sudden qualms possest,
Bvhr c |
rR1

12. He wrings his hands, he beats his breast.
Bil hf | a — Bil.br

13. By conscience stung he wildly stares;
g.br— —vcq |

14. And thus his guilty soul declares.
Bshf sh. |

15. Had the deep earth her stores confin'd,
Bdf d |
aR2

16. This heart had known sweet peace of mind,
br—R |
R1

17. 18. But virtue's sold! | Good Gods! what price |
vhr—vix | U Bsef s a |
aR2

19. Can recompense the pangs of vice?
F—R |

20. O bane of good! seducing cheat!
D Bsd f | n |
rR1

21. 22. Can man, weak man, | thy power defeat?
Bvhr —vcf | shf st—sdq |

23. Gold banish'd honour from the mind,
sch sw—sdq |
rL1

24. And only left the name behind;
br—R |

25. Gold sow'd the world with ev'ry ill;
Bphc | x |

26. Gold taught the murd'rer's sword to kill:
ceb sh—cdq |
Lix

27. 'T was gold instructed coward hearts
shf sh—sdq |
aR2x

28. In treach'ry's more pernicious arts.
Bvhr rj |
rR1

29. Who can recount the mischiefs o'er?
seq—sdq |
R2

30. Virtue resides on earth no more!
Bpdf d |

Observations on the Notation

No. I. The direction of motion expressed by the 4th small letter *r*, means that from the position in which both hands are presented *vhr*, they should move both towards the right and stop at the position *oblique* as noted by *q*, connected by a dash to the position mentioned.

No. II. The 4th small letter *n* signifies noting. See manner of motion in the synoptical table, and Chap. XIII. . . .

²John Gay (1685–1732), English poet. [Ed.]

No. XII. The position of the hands at first is, both *folded horizontal forwards* as expressed in the notation *Bfl. hf.* At the *a* connected by the dash, which signifies *ascending*, the hands are raised up, and at the next notation *Bfl. br.* they are forcibly withdrawn back on the breast.

No. XXI. This position begins *horizontal* as first noted *Bvhf*, and ends *elevated* as in the figure; *Bvhf*, but the *B* is omitted over the word *weak*, being understood by the connect-dash.

No. XXV. The *third small letter* relating to the transverse direction of the arm is often placed alone, but connected by a dash with a preceding set of letters, as already observed No. I. In such case it is to be understood that the position of the hands remains as before, and that the transverse direction only of the arm is changed. Here each arm passes through the whole semicircle from the position *across* to *extended*.

an oddly mechanical discussion,
but maybe a fluid mechanics

↓
any connection to the
mechanics of new media
(I'm thinking of Jenny
Frie and Logomachias)

↓
embodied (if you discount
the scientific approach here...)

it would be really interesting
to pair Austin w/ Clark on
the role of gestures in the
constitution of mind and
intelligent thought

in general, Austin becomes a
great and necessary place to
bring in attention to the discourse
of ability present throughout
enlightenment rhetoric

scintions of the human body

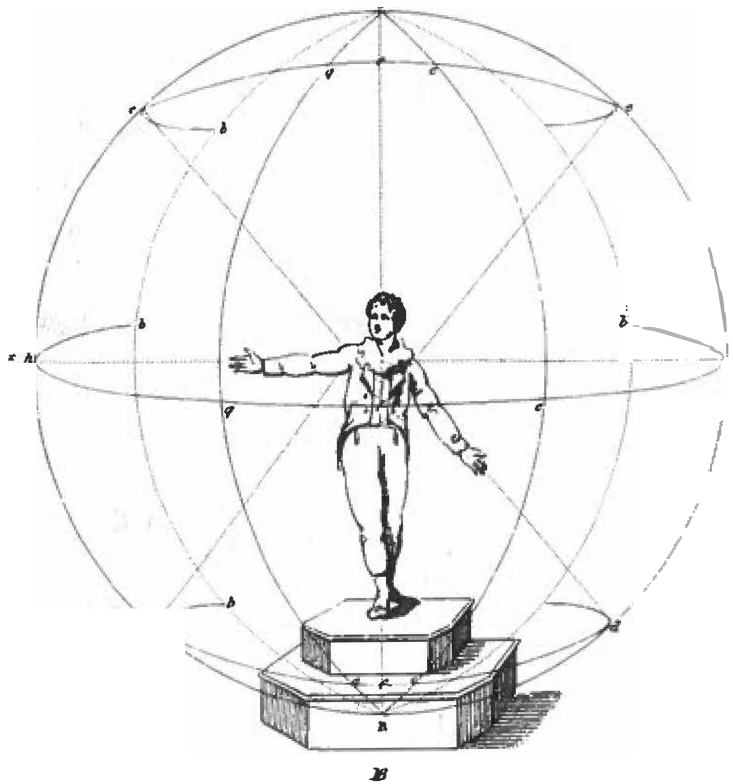
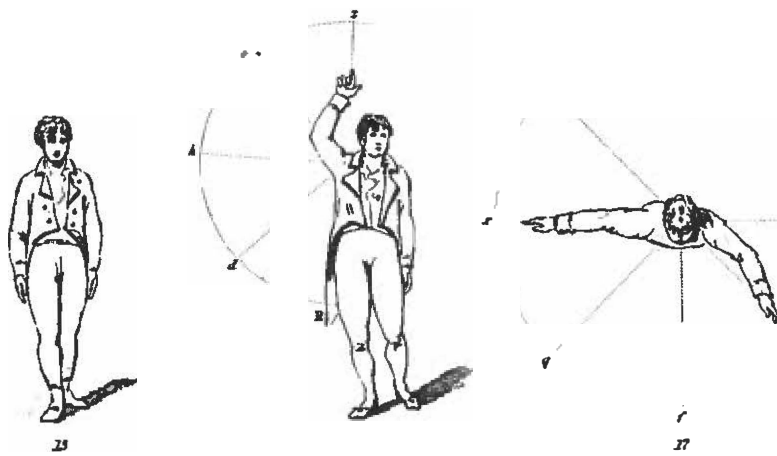


Figure 1



Figure 2

Positions of the Hands used by ancient Orators.

from Quintilian L. ii. c. 2.

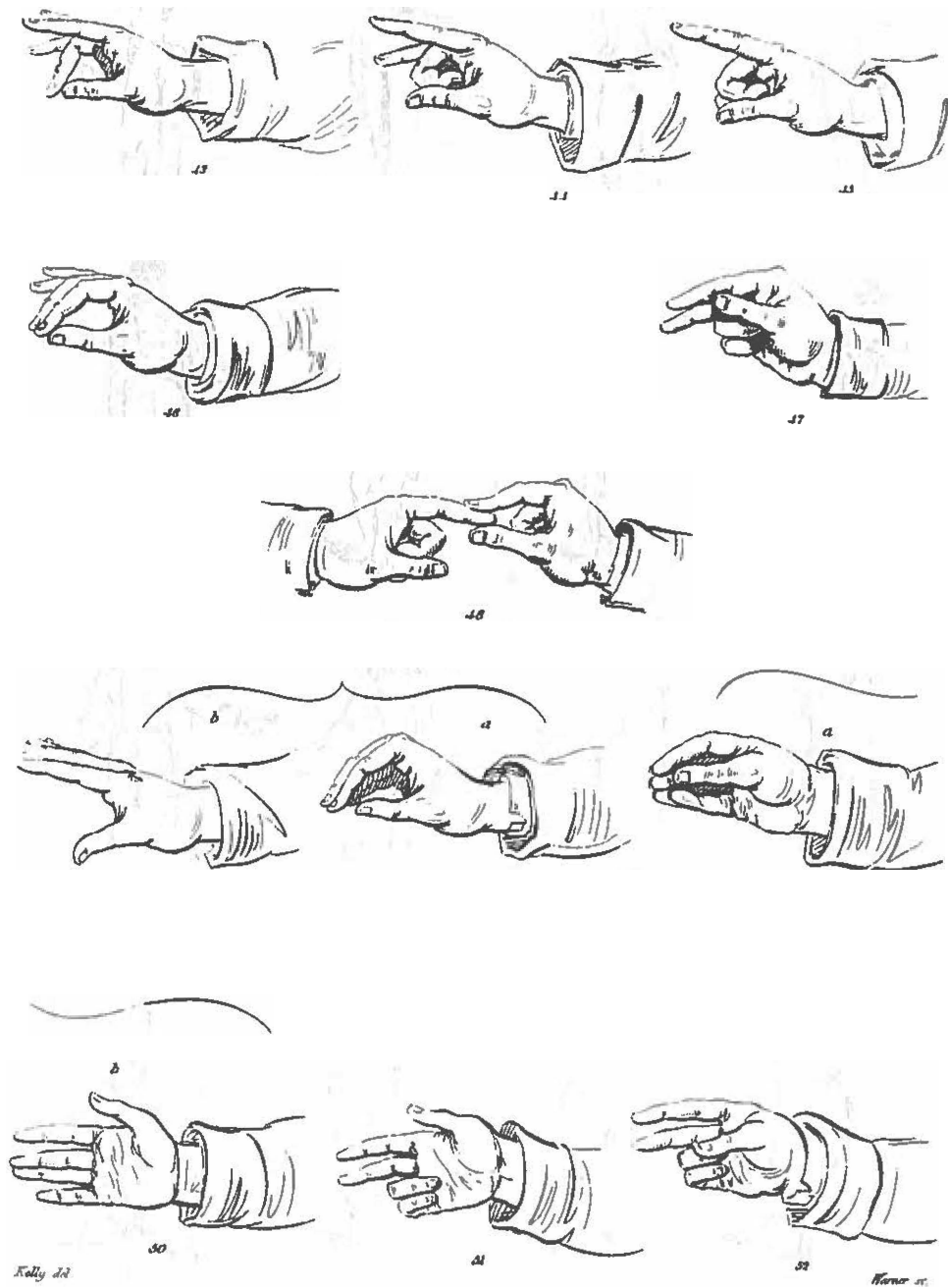


Figure 3

Part VI/ Sofia Lemos's "New Measure of All Things"
on bodies, (dis)ability, and norms / measurement

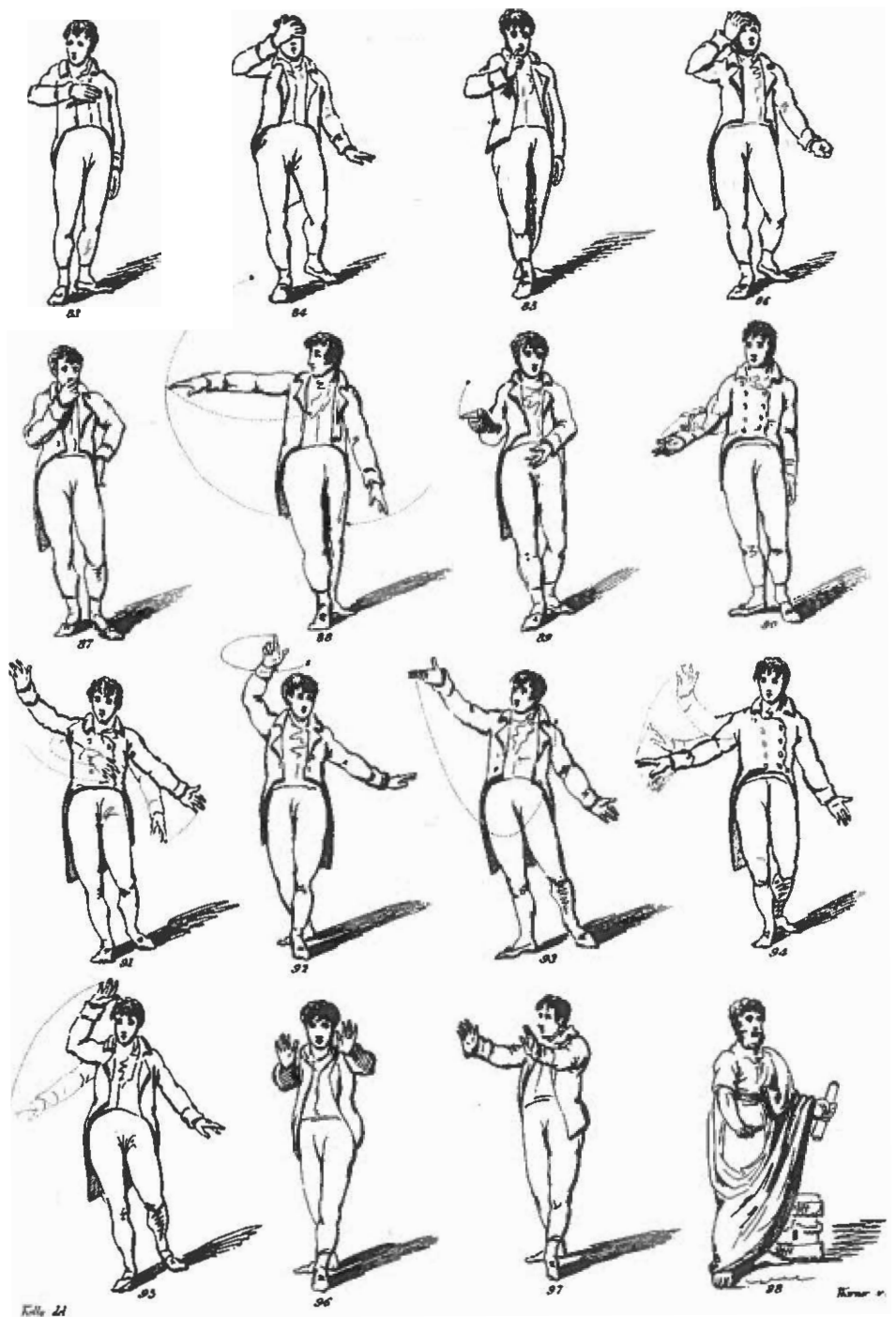


Figure 4

Table 1. Alphabetical Arrangement of Symbolic Letters

Above the Line. Hands, Arms, Body and Head.						Below the Line Feet.			
Small Letters relating to the Hand and Arm.									
1. Hand.	2. Elevation of the Arm.	3. Transverse Position of the Arm.	4 and 5. Motion and Force.	Capital B and double small Letters. Both Arms and both Hands.	Capitals for particular Parts.	Capitals for Head and Eyes.	Small Letters Steps.	Capitals Positions.	Capitals and small; significant Gestures.
A		- - -	ascending alternate	applied		{ assenting { averted	advance		appealing attention admiration aversion
B backwards		backwards	backwards beckoning	both	breast			both	
C clinched		across	collecting (contracted clinching	crossed clasped	Chin			- - -	commanding
D	- - - downwards	- - -	descending			{ down- wards { denying			deprecation declaration
E - - - elevated				encumbered	Eyes	erect			encourage- ment.
F forwards		forwards	forwards flourish	folded	Forehead	Forward		front	fear
G grasping		- - -	grasping						Grief
H holding	horizontal	- - -	- - -				- - -	- - -	Horror
I index		- - -	inwards	inclosed		inclined			
K - - -		- - -	- - -	a kimbo			- - - kneeling		{ Lamenta- tion
L collected		- - -	left	- - -	Lips		- - - left		{ Listening
M thumb		- - -	moderate						
N natural inwards		- - -	noting	enumerating	Nose				
O outwards		- - -	outwards						
P prone			{ pushing { pressing						Pride
Q - - -		oblique						oblique	
R - - - Rest			{ right re- coiling re- pressing rejecting	reposed		round	retire	right	
S supine			{ sweep springing, striking shaking			{ shaking { aside	{ start stamp shock		shame
T			{ touching throwing			Tossing			threatning
U						Upwards			
V Vertical		- - -	revolving			Vacancy			Veneration
W hollow		- - -	waving	wringing					
X extended	- - -	extended	extreme						
Z - - - Zenith									

The editors could have done more here to contextualize and explain all or some of these: more supplements