The Rhetoric of Sensibility in Eighteenth-Century Culture explores the burgeoning eighteenth-century fascination with the human body as an eloquent, expressive object. This wide-ranging study examines the role of the body within a number of cultural arenas – particularly oratory, the theatre, and the novel – and charts the efforts of projectors and reformers who sought to exploit the textual potential of the body for the public assertion of modern politeness. Paul Goring shows how diverse writers and performers including David Garrick, James Fordyce, Samuel Richardson, Sarah Fielding, and Laurence Sterne were involved in the construction of new ideals of physical eloquence – bourgeois, sentimental ideals which stood in contrast to more patrician, classical bodily modes. Through innovative readings of fiction and contemporary manuals on acting and public speaking, Goring reveals the ways in which the human body was treated as an instrument for the display of sensibility and polite values.

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THE RHETORIC OF SENSIBILITY IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY CULTURE

PAUL GORING
For Jan and Mike Goring
Of bodies chang’d to various forms, I sing.

Ovid, *Metamorphoses*
trans. John Dryden (1693)
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Preface

This is a book about bodies – about the eloquence of bodies and their capacity to express symbolically the values of a particular culture. The ‘rhetoric of sensibility’ under scrutiny here, then, is a bodily rhetoric. It is the passionate, emotional language of the body which came to be esteemed in British society in the mid eighteenth century, and which has since been regarded as one of the key markers of that period’s culture (or often ‘cult’) of sensibility. I have aimed to illuminate the relations between this powerful bodily rhetoric and notions of politeness which were developing in Britain at the time. The body, I suggest, came to be invested with new representational functions as a medium for the emblematisation or performance of modern politeness.

The development of new protocols of bodily behaviour was a widespread and multifaceted eighteenth-century enterprise taking place within a range of different cultural arenas. To capture that breadth I have cast my net wide, and the book therefore presents a large number of characters – orators, elocutionists, rhetoricians, actors, acting theorists, novelists, and others – whose various contributions to eighteenth-century culture involved some form of shaping of, or commentary upon, bodily eloquence. These include the very familiar, such as David Garrick, Samuel Richardson, and Laurence Sterne, together with figures who are less well known today, such as Thomas Sheridan, Aaron Hill, and Richard Graves. I hope that by making the study wide-ranging I have not sacrificed too much in terms of depth.

I have published articles on the ‘body projects’ of several of these figures before, and some of that work appears in a revised form here. An early version of Chapter 3 appeared in *1700-tallet: artikler om språk, litteratur, musikk og estetikk* (Kristiansand: Høyskoleforlaget, 2000). Part of Chapter 4 began life as a paper for a National Early Music Association conference on ‘Mime and Gesture in the Eighteenth-Century Theatre’, and was subsequently published in the Association’s journal, *Leading Notes* 13 (1997).
earlier form of much of Chapter 2 appeared in Literature and Theology 15:4 (2001) – I am grateful to Oxford University Press for allowing me to reproduce the material here.

Many other debts of gratitude have mounted up during the several years the book has been in the making, and I am pleased to be able to acknowledge the main ones here. Firstly, I must thank Linda Bree at Cambridge University Press for her initial interest in the project and for her guidance and enthusiasm throughout the writing process. Thanks are also due to the two anonymous readers assigned by the Press who have patiently endured drafts of the book and have given me invaluable advice on how to improve it. For making the production process agreeably smooth, I am grateful to the team at Cambridge University Press, as well as to Pauline Marsh, who copy-edited the typescript, and to Susan Forsyth, who produced the index.

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