

Mutatio Vestis: Clothing and Political Protest in the Late Roman Republic

A time of national emergency in Rome often incited public mourning, when people would change to garments that were a step down in rank or dirtied, a practice called *mutatio vestis*. Such a change of clothing demonstrated visually that Roman society, represented by the dress of the various orders, was under threat. Some scholars include a variety of clothing changes within this practice, like that of defendants in court, and do not analyze this political use in detail (Edmondson 2008, Blonski 2008), while others give rather abbreviated summaries and do not sufficiently examine how it functioned in the late Republic as a sign of senatorial unity and an appeal to public opinion (Heskel 1994, Kaster 2009, Lintott 1999). In this paper, by contrast, analysis of the different instances of *mutatio vestis* reveals that the Senate would often use this practice in the Late Republic as a form of protest against the actions of tribunes, against whom few other sanctioned forms of interference were possible. Members of the Senate took advantage of the visual spectacle and the illusion of senatorial unity to sway the emotions of the Roman people against tribunate legislation, announcements made in assemblies, and even vetos, with major consequences for the Republic. This practice was an extremely powerful form not just of resistance against the tribunes, but of recognizing the people as a force capable of determining the course of politics.

Mutatio vestis was normally decreed in a situation that threatened the public interest, but the formal decree could be manipulated by members of the Senate when they equated public interest with their own. A survey of examples shows that the senatorial view of what constituted a ‘national emergency’ in the Late Republic often meant certain actions of the tribunate which could be construed as detrimental to the Senate itself, creating civil discord within the government (e.g., Cic. *Sest.* 32; Plut. *Caes.* 30.6). If the Senate could get the Roman people to

oppose a threatened veto, for instance, the tribunes were supposed give up the veto (Morstein-Marx 2004: 124-6). Cicero asserts that a senatorial change of dress protesting his exile was meant to implore the people directly (*Att.* 3.15.5, *Dom.* 55). As an appeal to public opinion, *mutatio vestis* was an open acknowledgement by the elite members of the Senate that the masses had power over them, just as a jury controlled the fate of a defendant.

Furthermore, though debates in the Curia could grow intense, few outside could hear them, and thus only the final results of a vote were disseminated to the public (Morstein-Marx 2004: 244-249). A decree of *mutatio vestis* also served as a visual sign of senatorial unity, since all members had to wear mourning regardless of which side individuals took on the issue (Cass. Dio 37.42.2-43.3, 38.17.7). The consuls officially ended the ritual, so a consul's position with or against the majority often determined its effectiveness, as when the consul Gabinius cancelled the *mutatio vestis* protesting Cicero's exile (*Cic. Red. sen.* 31; *Sest.* 32). In one of Plutarch's accounts of December 50 BCE (*Pomp.* 58-59), the tribune Curio rejected a successful motion that Caesar, but not Pompey, relinquish his command, then had the Senate vote for mutual disarmament, winning 370 to 22. But as he was announcing victory and peace to the people waiting outside the Curia, the Senate changed to mourning dress and followed the consul Marcellus across the Forum as he went to tell Pompey to arm for war. This public spectacle contradicted the tribune's words of peace. These examples and others show the importance of the practice of *mutatio vestis*, because it was such a dramatic form of political protest, as both an expression and a source of conflict in the final days of the Republic.

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