

LAW 25

RE-CREATE YOURSELF

JUDGMENT

Do not accept the roles that society foists on you. Re-create yourself by forging a new identity, one that commands attention and never bores the audience. Be the master of your own image rather than letting others define it for you. Incorporate dramatic devices into your public gestures and actions—your power will be enhanced and your character will seem larger than life.

OBSERVANCE OF THE LAW I

Julius Caesar made his first significant mark on Roman society in 65 B.C., when he assumed the post of *aedile*, the official in charge of grain distribution and public games. He began his entrance into the public eye by organizing a series of carefully crafted and well-timed spectacles—wild-beast hunts, extravagant gladiator shows, theatrical contests. On several occasions, he paid for these spectacles out of his own pocket. To the common man, Julius Caesar became indelibly associated with these much-loved events. As he slowly rose to attain the position of consul, his popularity among the masses served as the foundation of his power. He had created an image of himself as a great public showman.

The man who intends to make his fortune in this ancient capital of the world [Rome] must be a chameleon susceptible of reflecting the colors of the atmosphere that surrounds him—a Proteus apt to assume every form, every shape. He must be supple, flexible, insinuating, close, inscrutable, often base, sometimes sincere, sometimes perfidious, always concealing a part of his knowledge, indulging in but one tone of voice, patient, a perfect master of his own countenance, as cold as ice when any other man would be all fire; and if unfortunately he is not religious at heart—a very common occurrence for a soul possessing the above requisites—he must have religion in his mind, that is to say, on his face, on his lips, in his manners; he must suffer quietly, if he be an honest man, the necessity of knowing himself an arrant hypocrite. The man whose soul would loathe such a life should leave Rome and seek his fortune elsewhere. I do not know whether I am praising or excusing myself, but of all those qualities I possessed but one—namely, flexibility.

MEMOIRS, GIOVANNI CASANOVA, 1725-1798

In 49 B.C., Rome was on the brink of a civil war between rival leaders, Caesar and Pompey. At the height of the tension, Caesar, an addict of the stage, attended a theatrical performance, and afterward, lost in thought, he wandered in the darkness back to his camp at the Rubicon, the river that divides Italy from Gaul, where he had been campaigning. To march his

army back into Italy across the Rubicon would mean the beginning of a war with Pompey.

Before his staff Caesar argued both sides, forming the options like an actor on stage, a precursor of Hamlet. Finally, to put his soliloquy to an end, he pointed to a seemingly innocent apparition at the edge of the river—a very tall soldier blasting a call on a trumpet, then going across a bridge over the Rubicon—and pronounced, “Let us accept this as a sign from the Gods and follow where they beckon, in vengeance on our double-dealing enemies. The die is cast.” All of this he spoke portentously and dramatically, gesturing toward the river and looking his generals in the eye. He knew that these generals were uncertain in their support, but his oratory overwhelmed them with a sense of the drama of the moment, and of the need to seize the time. A more prosaic speech would never have had the same effect. The generals rallied to his cause; Caesar and his army crossed the Rubicon and by the following year had vanquished Pompey, making Caesar dictator of Rome.

In warfare, Caesar always played the leading man with gusto. He was as skilled a horseman as any of his soldiers, and took pride in outdoing them in feats of bravery and endurance. He entered battle astride the strongest mount, so that his soldiers would see him in the thick of battle, urging them on, always positioning himself in the center, a godlike symbol of power and a model for them to follow. Of all the armies in Rome, Caesar’s was the most devoted and loyal. His soldiers, like the common people who had attended his entertainments, had come to identify with him and with his cause.

After the defeat of Pompey, the entertainments grew in scale. Nothing like them had ever been seen in Rome. The chariot races became more spectacular, the gladiator fights more dramatic, as Caesar staged fights to the death among the Roman nobility. He organized enormous mock naval battles on an artificial lake. Plays were performed in every Roman ward. A giant new theater was built that sloped dramatically down the Tarpeian Rock. Crowds from all over the empire flocked to these events, the roads to Rome lined with visitors’ tents. And in 45 B.C., timing his entry into the city for maximum effect and surprise, Caesar brought Cleopatra back to Rome after his Egyptian campaign, and staged even more extravagant public spectacles.

These events were more than devices to divert the masses; they dramatically enhanced the public's sense of Caesar's character, and made him seem larger than life. Caesar was the master of his public image, of which he was forever aware. When he appeared before crowds he wore the most spectacular purple robes. He would be upstaged by no one. He was notoriously vain about his appearance—it was said that one reason he enjoyed being honored by the Senate and people was that on these occasions he could wear a laurel wreath, hiding his baldness. Caesar was a masterful orator. He knew how to say a lot by saying a little, intuited the moment to end a speech for maximum effect. He never failed to incorporate a surprise into his public appearances—a startling announcement that would heighten their drama.

Immensely popular among the Roman people, Caesar was hated and feared by his rivals. On the ides of March—March 15—in the year 44 B.C., a group of conspirators led by Brutus and Cassius surrounded him in the senate and stabbed him to death. Even dying, however, he kept his sense of drama. Drawing the top of his gown over his face, he let go of the cloth's lower part so that it draped his legs, allowing him to die covered and decent. According to the Roman historian Suetonius, his final words to his old friend Brutus, who was about to deliver a second blow, were in Greek, and as if rehearsed for the end of a play: “You too, my child?”

Interpretation

The Roman theater was an event for the masses, attended by crowds unimaginable today. Packed into enormous auditoriums, the audience would be amused by raucous comedy or moved by high tragedy. Theater seemed to contain the essence of life, in its concentrated, dramatic form. Like a religious ritual, it had a powerful, instant appeal to the common man.

Julius Caesar was perhaps the first public figure to understand the vital link between power and theater. This was because of his own obsessive interest in drama. He sublimated this interest by making himself an actor and director on the world stage. He said his lines as if they had been scripted; he gestured and moved through a crowd with a constant sense of how he appeared to his audience. He incorporated surprise into his repertoire, building drama into his speeches, staging into his public appearances. His gestures were broad enough for the common man to grasp them instantly. He became immensely popular.

Caesar set the ideal for all leaders and people of power. Like him, you must learn to enlarge your actions through dramatic techniques such as surprise, suspense, the creation of sympathy, and symbolic identification. Also like him, you must be constantly aware of your audience—of what will please them and what will bore them. You must arrange to place yourself at the center, to command attention, and never to be upstaged at any cost.

OBSERVANCE OF THE LAW II

In the year 1831, a young woman named Aurore Dupin Dudevant left her husband and family in the provinces and moved to Paris. She wanted to be a writer; marriage, she felt, was worse than prison, for it left her neither the time nor the freedom to pursue her passion. In Paris she would establish her independence and make her living by writing.

Soon after Dudevant arrived in the capital, however, she had to confront certain harsh realities. To have any degree of freedom in Paris you had to have money. For a woman, money could only come through marriage or prostitution. No woman had ever come close to making a living by writing. Women wrote as a hobby, supported by their husbands, or by an inheritance. In fact when Dudevant first showed her writing to an editor, he told her, “You should make babies, Madame, not literature.”

Clearly Dudevant had come to Paris to attempt the impossible. In the end, though, she came up with a strategy to do what no woman had ever done—a strategy to re-create herself completely, forging a public image of her own making. Women writers before her had been forced into a ready-made role, that of the second-rate artist who wrote mostly for other women. Dudevant decided that if she had to play a role, she would turn the game around: She would play the part of a man.

In 1832 a publisher accepted Dudevant’s first major novel, *Indiana*. She had chosen to publish it under a pseudonym, “George Sand,” and all of Paris assumed this impressive new writer was male. Dudevant had sometimes worn men’s clothes before creating “George Sand” (she had always found men’s shirts and riding breeches more comfortable); now, as a public figure, she exaggerated the image. She added long men’s coats, gray hats, heavy boots, and dandyish cravats to her wardrobe. She smoked cigars and in conversation expressed herself like a man, unafraid to dominate the conversation or to use a saucy word.

This strange “male/female” writer fascinated the public. And unlike other women writers, Sand found herself accepted into the clique of male artists. She drank and smoked with them, even carried on affairs with the most

famous artists of Europe—Musset, Liszt, Chopin. It was she who did the wooing, and also the abandoning—she moved on at her discretion.

Those who knew Sand well understood that her male persona protected her from the public's prying eyes. Out in the world, she enjoyed playing the part to the extreme; in private she remained herself. She also realized that the character of "George Sand" could grow stale or predictable, and to avoid this she would every now and then dramatically alter the character she had created; instead of conducting affairs with famous men, she would begin meddling in politics, leading demonstrations, inspiring student rebellions. No one would dictate to her the limits of the character she had created. Long after she died, and after most people had stopped reading her novels, the larger-than-life theatricality of that character has continued to fascinate and inspire.

Interpretation

Throughout Sand's public life, acquaintances and other artists who spent time in her company had the feeling they were in the presence of a man. But in her journals and to her closest friends, such as Gustave Flaubert, she confessed that she had no desire to be a man, but was playing a part for public consumption. What she really wanted was the power to determine her own character. She refused the limits her society would have set on her. She did not attain her power, however, by being herself; instead she created a persona that she could constantly adapt to her own desires, a persona that attracted attention and gave her presence.

Understand this: The world wants to assign you a role in life. And once you accept that role you are doomed. Your power is limited to the tiny amount allotted to the role you have selected or have been forced to assume. An actor, on the other hand, plays many roles. Enjoy that protean power, and if it is beyond you, at least forge a new identity, one of your own making, one that has had no boundaries assigned to it by an envious and resentful world. This act of defiance is Promethean: It makes you responsible for your own creation.

Your new identity will protect you from the world precisely because it is not "you"; it is a costume you put on and take off. You need not take it personally. And your new identity sets you apart, gives you theatrical presence. Those in the back rows can see you and hear you. Those in the front rows marvel at your audacity.

Do not people talk in society of a man being a great actor? They do not mean by that that he feels, but that he excels in simulating, though he feels nothing.
Denis Diderot, 1713-1784

KEYS TO POWER

The character you seem to have been born with is not necessarily who you are; beyond the characteristics you have inherited, your parents, your friends, and your peers have helped to shape your personality. The Promethean task of the powerful is to take control of the process, to stop allowing others that ability to limit and mold them. Remake yourself into a character of power. Working on yourself like clay should be one of your greatest and most pleasurable life tasks. It makes you in essence an artist—an artist creating yourself.

In fact, the idea of self-creation comes from the world of art. For thousands of years, only kings and the highest courtiers had the freedom to shape their public image and determine their own identity. Similarly, only kings and the wealthiest lords could contemplate their own image in art, and consciously alter it. The rest of mankind played the limited role that society demanded of them, and had little self-consciousness.

A shift in this condition can be detected in Velázquez's painting *Las Meninas*, made in 1656. The artist appears at the left of the canvas, standing before a painting that he is in the process of creating, but that has its back to us—we cannot see it. Beside him stands a princess, her attendants, and one of the court dwarves, all watching him work. The people posing for the painting are not directly visible, but we can see them in tiny reflections in a mirror on the back wall—the king and queen of Spain, who must be sitting somewhere in the foreground, outside the picture.

The painting represents a dramatic change in the dynamics of power and the ability to determine one's own position in society. For Velázquez, the artist, is far more prominently positioned than the king and queen. In a sense he is more powerful than they are, since he is clearly the one controlling the image—their image. Velázquez no longer saw himself as the slavish, dependent artist. He had remade himself into a man of power. And indeed the first people other than aristocrats to play openly with their image in Western society were artists and writers, and later on dandies and bohemians. Today the concept of self-creation has slowly filtered down to the rest of society, and has become an ideal to aspire to. Like Velazquez,

you must demand for yourself the power to determine your position in the painting, and to create your own image.

The first step in the process of self-creation is self-consciousness—being aware of yourself as an actor and taking control of your appearance and emotions. As Diderot said, the bad actor is the one who is always sincere. People who wear their hearts on their sleeves out in society are tiresome and embarrassing. Their sincerity notwithstanding, it is hard to take them seriously. Those who cry in public may temporarily elicit sympathy, but sympathy soon turns to scorn and irritation at their self-obsessiveness—they are crying to get attention, we feel, and a malicious part of us wants to deny them the satisfaction.

Good actors control themselves better. They can play sincere and heartfelt, can affect a tear and a compassionate look at will, but they don't have to feel it. They externalize emotion in a form that others can understand. Method acting is fatal in the real world. No ruler or leader could possibly play the part if all of the emotions he showed had to be real. So learn self-control. Adopt the plasticity of the actor, who can mold his or her face to the emotion required.

The second step in the process of self-creation is a variation on the George Sand strategy: the creation of a memorable character, one that compels attention, that stands out above the other players on the stage. This was the game Abraham Lincoln played. The homespun, common country man, he knew, was a kind of president that America had never had but would delight in electing. Although many of these qualities came naturally to him, he played them up—the hat and clothes, the beard. (No president before him had worn a beard.) Lincoln was also the first president to use photographs to spread his image, helping to create the icon of the “homespun president.”

Good drama, however, needs more than an interesting appearance, or a single stand-out moment. Drama takes place over time—it is an unfolding event. Rhythm and timing are critical. One of the most important elements in the rhythm of drama is suspense. Houdini for instance, could sometimes complete his escape acts in seconds—but he drew them out to minutes, to make the audience sweat.

The key to keeping the audience on the edge of their seats is letting events unfold slowly, then speeding them up at the right moment, according to a pattern and tempo that you control. Great rulers from Napoleon to Mao

Tse-tung have used theatrical timing to surprise and divert their public. Franklin Delano Roosevelt understood the importance of staging political events in a particular order and rhythm.

At the time of his 1932 presidential election, the United States was in the midst of a dire economic crisis. Banks were failing at an alarming rate. Shortly after winning the election, Roosevelt went into a kind of retreat. He said nothing about his plans or his cabinet appointments. He even refused to meet the sitting president, Herbert Hoover, to discuss the transition. By the time of Roosevelt's inauguration the country was in a state of high anxiety.

In his inaugural address, Roosevelt shifted gears. He made a powerful speech, making it clear that he intended to lead the country in a completely new direction, sweeping away the timid gestures of his predecessors. From then on the pace of his speeches and public decisions—cabinet appointments, bold legislation—unfolded at an incredibly rapid rate. The period after the inauguration became known as the “Hundred Days,” and its success in altering the country's mood partly stemmed from Roosevelt's clever pacing and use of dramatic contrast. He held his audience in suspense, then hit them with a series of bold gestures that seemed all the more momentous because they came from nowhere. You must learn to orchestrate events in a similar manner, never revealing all your cards at once, but unfolding them in a way that heightens their dramatic effect.

Besides covering a multitude of sins, good drama can also confuse and deceive your enemy. During World War II, the German playwright Bertolt Brecht worked in Hollywood as a screenwriter. After the war he was called before the House Committee on Un-American Activities for his supposed Communist sympathies. Other writers who had been called to testify planned to humiliate the committee members with an angry emotional stand. Brecht was wiser: He would play the committee like a violin, charming them while fooling them as well. He carefully rehearsed his responses, and brought along some props, notably a cigar on which he puffed away, knowing the head of the committee liked cigars. And indeed he proceeded to beguile the committee with well-crafted responses that were ambiguous, funny, and double-edged. Instead of an angry, heartfelt tirade, he ran circles around them with a staged production, and they let him off scot-free.

Other dramatic effects for your repertoire include the *beau geste*, an action at a climactic moment that symbolizes your triumph or your

boldness. Caesar's dramatic crossing of the Rubicon was a *beau geste*—a move that dazzled the soldiers and gave him heroic proportions. You must also appreciate the importance of stage entrances and exits. When Cleopatra first met Caesar in Egypt, she arrived rolled up in a carpet, which she arranged to have unfurled at his feet. George Washington twice left power with flourish and fanfare (first as a general, then as a president who refused to sit for a third term), showing he knew how to make the moment count, dramatically and symbolically. Your own entrances and exits should be crafted and planned as carefully.

Remember that overacting can be counterproductive—it is another way of spending too much effort trying to attract attention. The actor Richard Burton discovered early in his career that by standing totally still onstage, he drew attention to himself and away from the other actors. It is less what you do that matters, clearly, than how you do it—your gracefulness and imposing stillness on the social stage count for more than overdoing your part and moving around too much.

Finally: Learn to play many roles, to be whatever the moment requires. Adapt your mask to the situation—be protean in the faces you wear. Bismarck played this game to perfection: To a liberal he was a liberal, to a hawk he was a hawk. He could not be grasped, and what cannot be grasped cannot be consumed.

Image:

The Greek Sea-God Proteus.

His power came from his ability to change shape at will, to be whatever the moment required. When Menelaus, brother of Agamemnon, tried to seize him, Proteus transformed himself into a lion, then a serpent, a panther, a boar, running water, and finally a leafy tree.

Authority: Know how to be all things to all men. A discreet Proteus—a scholar among scholars, a saint among saints. That is the art of winning over everyone, for like attracts like. Take note of temperaments and adapt yourself to that of each person you meet—follow the lead of the serious and jovial in turn, changing your mood discreetly. (Baltasar Gracián, 1601-1658)

REVERSAL

There can really be no reversal to this critical law: Bad theater is bad theater. Even appearing natural requires art—in other words, acting. Bad acting only creates embarrassment. Of course you should not be too dramatic—avoid the histrionic gesture. But that is simply bad theater anyway, since it violates centuries-old dramatic laws against overacting. In essence there is no reversal to this law.