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**Audiences with the Dead: Public Speech and Private Magic at Rome**

Information about the past was a precious and jealously-guarded commodity among Rome's elite classes—hence the strong ideological charge of such “information,” whatever its ultimate source or mode of reception. This paper explores a Roman fantasy of direct access to the past as embodied, however tenuously, in the spirit(s) of the dead. While my focus is public oratory, I take the orator's language to be emblematic of Roman public discourse in the late republic. I argue that the representation of the dead in the speeches of Cicero undoes the apparently monologic unity of many elite pronouncements about the illustrious Roman past. For all that the elite might claim to “pass down” *tradere* or “report”(re)ferre historical narratives that supplied a basis for their power, the Roman orator had recourse to “conjuring the dead,” *mortuos excitare*, a technique that points away from the sanctioned world of Roman politics to the broader, more obscure, and often marginal audiences for myth, folktale, and magical ritual. My work thus responds not only to the interest in Roman oratory and ideology evinced by a growing number of Latinists, but to a heightened concern with the role of the dead in ancient culture, as attested so richly from a Hellenic standpoint in Sara Iles Johnston's recent *Restless Dead: Encounters between the Living and the Dead in Ancient Greece* (Princeton, 1999).

I focus on the *Pro Caelio*'s famous *prosopopoeia* of Appius Claudius Caecus in order to broach questions of written vs. oral language, male eloquence and the de-voicing of the female, and class-based claims to arbitrate morality. Understanding Caelius' trial requires us to consider the multiplicity of republican audiences: held during the scenic festival of the *ludi Megalenses*, the case was tried before a jury who might otherwise have been enjoying stage plays. Drama and oratory, as well a wider field of Roman performance including both public and private ritual, comprise a shifting network of cultural analogs within which Cicero's Appius grows in persuasive force. Cicero's technique suggests the limits of the term “information” when applied to virtually any representation of the past in late republican society. Perhaps more salient than becoming informed *about* the past was being informed *by* it, communing *with* it, and even speaking *to* it. Discourse with the dead remains a privileged ideal in spite of strategies to limit and fix historical knowledge so as to better control its dissemination.