Terrill, Robert E. "Rhetorical Imitation and Civic Diversity." *Advances in the History of Rhetoric* 22.2 (2019): 167-178.

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

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Rhetorical Imitation and Civic Diversity

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ABSTRACT

The value of *imitatio* as a pedagogical tactic in rhetorical education has been attested to for millennia. But within the context of a culture of diversity, imitation becomes potentially problematic. This essay describes two attitudes toward *imitatio* that may contribute to modifying the practice in ways that enable it to be recovered for use in contemporary classrooms. The first entails reimagining the relationships between students and their model texts as multivalent conversations rather than dyadic exchanges; the second entails challenging the hierarchies that are implied when students are expected to model their work on texts that are considered superior. These two attitudes encourage the integration of *imitatio* into a rhetorical education that is essential for the cultivation of a just and engaged twenty-first century citizenship.

It would be an understatement to say that the value of *imitatio* as a pedagogical strategy is widely attested among rhetoricians. James Jasinski has reminded us that it "was central to the thought of numerous ancient teachers and theorists including Isocrates, Longinus, Cicero, Quintilian, and Dionysius of Halicarnassus" (328), and Donald Lemen Clark adds that Augustine "believed that the preacher, as well as the legal advocate and the historian, could learn by imitation" (12). The praise of imitation as a fundamental educational strategy continued for centuries, so that "from the time of Gorgias until the middle of [the twentieth] century, any student who received formal education at any level was almost certainly subjected to explicit exercises in imitation" (Muckelbauer 62). Contemporary scholars who are engaged in recovering this tradition often take care to assure their readers that imitation, within a rhetorical context, does not culminate in identical copies but instead in new discourses that are informed by the originals though perhaps radically different from them (Leff 97). It introduces students to reading and writing as a two-sided practice wherein the interpretive and productive impulses, incomplete on their own, are interwoven into a full cloth. The way that *imitatio* brings these two impulses together may be one reason for its widespread popularity; it can enhance pedagogies that emphasize rhetoric as a hermeneutic art as well as those that emphasize rhetoric as a productive art.

Indeed, the virtues of *imitatio* that are rehearsed among rhetoricians are myriad. Often the case for *imitatio* is set against the sometimes prevailing notion that imitative pedagogies somehow inhibit the cultivation of individuality and self-expression, "the suspicion among us that imitation stultifies and inhibits … rather than empowers and liberates" writers and speakers (Corbett 249). Adherents of *imitatio*, in contrast, observe that the practice enables students to internalize a storehouse of rules and forms as an inventional resource. *Imitatio* does not constrain the inventional range of students, in this view, but enables that range, opening up for them new ways of writing and speaking that otherwise might not have occurred to them. Such students might come to understand themselves as engaged in "a dialogue with, not a parroting of, *the language of the other*, without whom no such thing as 'a language of one's own' would be possible" (Farmer and Arrington 28). Neither the arrangement, style, memory, or delivery of student work is determined by the discourses that they emulate, but the study of past inventional practices boosts the potency and innovation in students' own inventional practices. "Mistrust of *imitatio* is natural to modern critics in the light of the Romantic antithesis between imitation and originality," Elaine Fantham notes, but this mistrust does not take into account "the insight, subtlety, and flexibility with which imitation was encouraged by the best ancient teachers" (115). Quintilian, for example, suggests that *imitatio* should not result in "a mere passive reproduction" but instead in a new text intended to "rival and vie with the original in expressing the same thoughts" (X.v.4–5). He also points out that the goal of mimetic pedagogy is not merely to accumulate "a crowd of words" but instead to develop the "judgment" to know when and where particular words might best be used (X.i.5–10).

In their extensive review of more modern views of *imitatio*, Frank M. Farmer and Philip K. Arrington find that despite its perceived limitations as a rhetorical pedagogy, teachers of rhetoric continue to value imitation for many of the same reasons evident in the classical tradition: it can contribute to the range of stylistic resources upon which students can draw, including matters of organization and genre; it can play a heuristic role in the inventional process; it can enable students to glean from models potential solutions to problems that inevitably arise during the composing process; and it can even expand their repertoires of identity through the emulation of the thought processes of masterful writers and speakers.

A context of diversity, however, compounds concerns about the degree to which imitation might squelch the development of individual voices. The ancient teachers of rhetoric were working with relatively homogenous student populations, within a culture in which only a few select and privileged individuals would have the opportunity to write or speak in public. Generally, only small differences in background and status existed among the students, or between the students and the composers of the rhetorical

texts that they were called upon to imitate. Within a diverse public, however, these differences can be assumed to be neither small nor trivial. Aristotle famously observed, in his *Poetics*, that imitation seems to be a fundamental human instinct: "From childhood," as he puts it, "men have an instinct for representation, and in this respect man differs from the other animals that he is far more imitative and learns his first lessons by representing things" (I.iv.3). It is on this observation that Aristotle builds his theory of poetics, primarily depending on extensions and refinements of these imitative instincts (I.iv.8). While it may be that imitation is a universal human instinct, within human political cultures it gathers significant and heterogeneous implications.

Kirt Wilson has explored the implications of *imitatio* with regards to race, specifically, in his essay titled "The Racial Politics of Imitation in the Nineteenth Century." Wilson explains that "imitation was embroiled in a struggle for power, social status, and identity" that highlighted the instabilities that did mark, and that do mark, US American public culture. Some imitative practices reified racial hierarchy and others destabilized it. For example, in the antebellum United States, children of white elites engaged in *imitatio* as a component of neo-classical education, while some slaves were able to gain literacy by imitating the literate practices of whites, and some "free people of color struggled to retain their unique racial heritage and imitate the white middle class" (92). After emancipation, many African Americans sought to increase their physical and symbolic distance from southern whites by rejecting mimetic expectations, but even as they did so, they "began to resemble European Americans" (93). Imitation was seen by some as an "instinctual, primitive habit that hindered rather than advanced" African Americans (97); put simply, whites invented, blacks imitated. But at the same time, imitation was feared by some white people because they believed that African Americans were so skilled at it that they could hide their inferiority and thus, through assimilation, "introduce a sickness into the body politic that would infect and perhaps destroy its (white) soul" (97). Even black marriages were dismissed as empty imitations of white domesticity with the potential to cheapen the strength and value of white marriage (94).

Similarly, Homi K. Bhabha has reminded us that imitation can be a powerful instrument for sustaining the supremacy of a dominant culture as well as for undermining that culture; it is, as he puts it, among "the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge" (126). Colonizers may expect and encourage the colonized to adopt some aspects of the colonizers' culture, and in this way to lose some of their identity while at the same time retaining their marked position as "other." The colonized become "*almost the same, but not quite*" or, as Bhabha puts it more explicitly, "*almost the same, but not white*" (130). And yet, because of this partiality,

there is some degree of ambivalence; as the colonized reproduce the appearances of the colonizing culture, they also reveal something of its artificiality, and through these apertures of ambiguity – such as those Wilson points out – the oppressed might offer both challenge and critique.

At the end of Wilson's essay, he acknowledges that "the rejection of imitation is justified, even necessary, if by imitation we mean the impoverished definition in racist stereotypes or a sycophantic desire to replicate whiteness" (105). But he also suggests that it may be that "a revived form of imitation offers an additional solution to the problem of two nations, black and white, separate, hostile, unequal" (105). I have not discovered a revived form of imitation that might answer Wilson's call. In this brief essay, however, I do endeavor to describe two orientations or attitudes toward the pedagogical practice of *imitatio* that might contribute to continuing contemplations about the contributions of rhetorical education within a context of diversity. I begin with a reminder of what is at stake in a rhetorical pedagogy, and then proceed to describe these two attitudes that might be emphasized within such a pedagogy as it is positioned within a context of diversity.

Toward Citizenship

Those of us who engage in rhetorical education understand that more is at stake than merely the training of tongues. Certainly we would agree with scholars such as Danielle Allen, for example, who has argued that a reinvigorated rhetorical tradition is necessary for us to be able to locate a vocabulary for repairing the race-based fissures of distrust that rend our contemporary public culture (140–141), and with Elizabeth Markovits, who suggests that a program of "rhetorical literacy" is fundamental to our ability to "talk and listen to one another in our own democracy" (174). But we also understand that our task extends beyond the cultivation of civic discursive competence and entails the cultivation of particular kinds of persons (Fleming "Course of Study" 172). The invention and performance of civic discourse is an inherently embodied act, so that training in rhetorical speech is intimately linked with the coaching of rhetorical selves. A person who is the product of a rhetorical education can be expected to be "engaged, articulate, resourceful, sympathetic, civil," having cultivated "ethically framed, action-oriented, intellectual capacities" in the course of being "trained in, conditioned by, and devoted to what was once called *eloquence*" (Fleming, "Course of Study" 172–173, 180).

This line of thought is rooted firmly in classical traditions of rhetoric, where the efforts of teachers "were focused on 'capacitating' the individual student to lead the life of an active and responsible citizen" (Hauser 40). Rhetoric has long been concerned with not only the fitting of students to language but also, and consequently, with the fitting of individuals to citizenship. Isocrates, for example,

describes an intimate and recursive synecdochic connection between rhetorical facility and character: on the one hand, it is through the production of words that one produces and shares an image of one's character ("Antidosis" 7, 55); on the other hand, he reminds us that those students who study the art of rhetoric "may, if they will, be helped more speedily towards honesty of character than towards facility in oratory" ("Against the Sophists" 21). Cicero lamented the severing of the tongue and the brain (which he blamed on Plato's Socrates) that resulted in separating "the science of wise thinking from that of elegant speaking" (*De Oratore* III, xvi, 60–61). That most exemplary ancient teacher of rhetoric, Quintilian, articulated a vision of a rhetorical *paideia* that famously – if somewhat ambiguously – linked training in rhetorical production intimately with the cultivation of character. And recently the fundamental link between rhetoric and civic character has been reaffirmed in the widely noted "Mt. Oread Manifesto on Rhetorical Education" which resolves that teachers of rhetoric "should cross departmental and disciplinary lines and collaborate to design and implement an integrated curriculum in rhetorical education … in order to develop citizen participants, not simply future employees or more literate students" (Keith and Mountford 3). An education in rhetoric does not eventuate in some neutral or detached form of "critical thinking" but in a mode of critical judgment that is specifically directed toward civic engagement, "a faculty of civic life disciplined by deep-seated norms of effectiveness and virtue" (Fleming "Becoming Rhetorical" 93).

But encomia on the value of rhetorical education cannot tell us what sort of pedagogy is best suited to a project of equipping students to become participatory citizens in a democratic culture. In what follows, I propose a modest contribution to this ongoing conversation, one that focuses on reconsidering attitudes toward *imitatio*.

From Singular Dialogue Toward Multiple Conversations

Imitatio often is described in ways that evoke individual students toiling away with an exemplary text, squeezing out all that might be useful from it and then endeavoring to build a next text in its shadow. What seems to be imagined is a give-and-take between a rhetor and a text, a recursive engagement through which the student analyzes the exemplar and then crafts a new text based upon that analysis. The student speaks to the text, and the text speaks back to the student; the resultant rhetoric that is made by the student bears the impress of the transcript of this interpretive/productive process.

Rhetorical imitation, then, as a pedagogical practice, might be described as a dyadic process involving a two-way exchange. To the extent that this dyadic exchange entails "the incorporation of another's (or others') discourse into our own" (Minock 494), it can help to cultivate among students some habits that contribute to civic life. Some of the skills that students hone through the

process of rhetorical imitation – listening and reading in a spirit of engaged generosity, careful attention to detail, mindfulness of audience and context, and so on – are transferrable to the cultivation of civic culture. For example, the incorporation of another's language into one's own can help to foster a capacity to see the world from the point of view of fellow citizens, which surely is among the most valuable of the citizenly virtues. Imitation can equip us for the task of finding and extending common ground through the sharing of common discourses. A dyadic conception of *imitatio* can help us to find ways to talk to one another, a task that in practice has proven, and will continue to prove, to be infinitely more challenging and complex than its apparent simplicity would suggest.

Within a context of diversity, however, such dyadic models may be problematic, because a pair is only the smallest possible human social group. While it may be possible to imagine a small-scale democracy – a club, perhaps, or a neighborhood – in which each member engages in serial dialogues with every other member, the model would break down quickly in a large and complex culture like the contemporary United States. The model also strains against the rhetorical situation posed by public address and analogous rhetorical performances, where citizens receive and respond as a part of a group, or groups, as well as those situations in which engagement with other members of a public that is called into being by rhetorical address may be just as significant as the engagement with the address itself. In addition, students engaged in rhetorical imitation must learn how to hold the text at arm's length, because if they identify too strongly with their model they will lack the critical distance that is necessary to accomplish the interpretive phase of the practice. The dyadic model of mimetic pedagogy, in other words, may inadvertently reinforce some of the binary logics that have created the fissures and divides that a rhetorical education might be intended to ameliorate.

Any teacher who has used *imitatio*, just as well as anyone who has ever taken composition seriously, knows that a strictly two-way conception breaks down in practice. Though we might describe rhetorical imitation as though the process entails an interaction between a singular student and a singular text, we know that writers, speakers, and rhetorical inventors of all kinds may draw upon a great many exemplars. We, and our students, seem to understand the wisdom underlying the advice that John J. Murphy phrases this way: students of rhetoric "who 'imitated' twenty-five other writers … would have twenty-five possible ways to form [their] own writing or speech in the future – [they] would thus enlarge [their] arsenal of possibilities when it came to decide what to say" (Quintilian 583). W. Ross Winterowd gestures toward this element of the rhetorical tradition when he points out that "one way or another, every rhetorician must subscribe to the doctrine of imitation, for, obviously, parthenogenesis occurs no more in matters of discourse than

in the natural world" (161). In a classroom situation, you, me, or Isocrates might ask each individual student to attend to one discrete text, to start, but by the end of the term a student will have encountered and analyzed a great many texts, possibly in a variety of modalities and media, as well as the thoughts and perspectives of the other students, and all of this becomes enrolled in their archive of inventional resources.

The proper metaphor for the textual relationships that are fostered through mimesis, then, may not be the singular dyad but varied and multivalent conversations. Robert Hariman has reminded us that "democracy is primarily a form of speech that cannot be spoken by any one person," and I would go on to suggest that it also cannot adequately be spoken by a pair of persons. "It can be learned well only amidst many voices" (227). Teaching through *imitatio* enables participation in this democratic conversation because it not only encourages students to engage closely with a single text, though it can do that, but it also invites students to recognize that all rhetorical texts, and their makers, are suspended, like particles in an emulsion, within a lively and endlessly mutable ecology of other rhetorical texts (Edbauer 9). This is a consequence and extension of the observation that *imitatio* helps to emphasize for students the intertextuality of all rhetorical texts, as it engages them in a process of invention that relies on the analysis of texts produced by others, which in turn invites them to see that public texts necessarily bear the imprint of multiple authors (Still and Worton 2). And this is the implied pedagogy of Kenneth Burke's parlor, his famous parable wherein you enter a room where a conversation is ongoing and sit and listen attentively for a while before you "put in your oar" (110). While you are listening, you are not preparing to enter into a two-way dialogue but into a conversational network of diverse voices and perspectives. You are not listening passively, but actively, both hermeneutically and productively, with an eye toward inventing new discourse that mimics the subject and style and content and cadence of the conversation but also adds something novel. Burke clearly imagines his parlor as a place with diverse opinions, and he says nothing that would indicate that it might not be diverse in other ways, as well. It may serve as a paradigm, then, of the sort of endlessly selfreferencing, multivalent, and imitative conversations that we might imagine to be at the core of democracy and for which we might also imagine that we are preparing our students.

From the Vertical to the Horizontal

Embracing a conversational model for rhetorical imitation invites a further conceptual   modification, beginning with what might be described as a vertical orientation that informs much of the tradition of thought about *imitatio*. Donald Lemen Clark points out, for example, that the proposition

that "imitating … elders and betters" helps students "to improve whatever ability" they may have "was universally believed in antiquity" (12). Students should look upward, in other words, when they are seeking their models. Sharon Crowley, similarly, reminds us that ancient teachers of rhetoric "insisted that their students not only read and interpret the great masters, but that they engage in ceaseless paraphrase and translation of those artists and works thought to be most worthwhile" (25). Isocrates, in the *Antidosis*, recommends that orators in training should select "those examples which are the most illustrious and the most edifying" (277). In *Against the Sophists*, he recommends that rhetoric teachers themselves should "set such an example of oratory that the students who have taken form under [their] instruction and are able to pattern after [them] will, from the outset, show in their speaking a degree of grace and charm which is not found in others" (17–18). Cicero, in *De Oratore*, has Antonius recommend that students of rhetoric should copy the most illustrious orators "in such a way as to strive with all possible care to attain the most excellent qualities" of the models (II.xxii.90). Quintilian similarly recommends that "the texts to be read [by students of rhetoric] should be those which will best nourish the mind and develop the character" (I.viii.8), though he also recognizes the difficulty in choosing what the best models for imitation are (II.v.25–26). James J. Murphy notes that Augustine ultimately rejected "the perceptive theories implicit in Roman education" in favor of an "increased reliance on *imitatio* as a learning process" as long as Scripture would provide the exemplars (*Rhetoric in the Middle Ages 59*, 289).

In all of these sentiments, the models are located above the students in the sense that they are examples of prose more accomplished, effective, or inspiring than that which the students can yet produce. Students engaged in *imitatio*, conceived of in this way, are striving to move up an imagined ladder of eloquence, rung by rung, through emulation of examples just at the extent of their grasp. These exemplars must be near enough to the students' own capacities to be "accessible," as Quintilian notes, so as not to be offputting or mystifying (II.v.18–19), but also distinguished enough in quality from students' own work so as to have an upward invitational pull.

Wilson quotes Frederick Douglass, who famously found a copy of *The Colombian Orator* to be an immensely influential compendium of exemplars, as echoing this sentiment: "I believe in imitation. I think the disposition to imitate what is a little in advance of what we before knew is one of the most civilizing qualities of the human mind, and I am going to imitate all the good I can, and leave unimitated all the bad I find in the world" (100). But Douglass's endorsement of *imitatio* also points up the problems inherent in this implicitly vertical orientation within a culture of diversity: to put it bluntly, the exemplars often regarded as worthy of emulation are produced by privileged white men. Here again the colonial politics of mimesis are

relevant, as the oppressed are invited to mimic the oppressors. Just as the dyadic model of *imitatio* has the potential to re-inscribe the binary logics that contribute to the divisions within our contemporary civic culture, so too can the emulation of worthy exemplars re-inscribe the hierarchies that threaten the coherence of a diverse democracy.

Mimetic pedagogy might be reimagined within a context of diversity, however, if the exemplars were selected not according to some (inherently problematic) standards of quality, but instead according to the ways that they might stretch the experiences and comfort zones of the students. The goals of a mimetic pedagogy, in other words, might be realigned so that instead of striving upward, toward some imagined ideal of eloquence, students strive outward, into unfamiliar perspectives. This would be a mimetic pedagogy oriented horizontally, rather than vertically, and thus one that might invite students toward perspectives they otherwise would not have considered, toward challenging their biases and questioning their assumptions, and therefore toward inventing new and potentially more inclusive discourses. In a vertical conception of *imitatio* eloquence might be thought of as flowing downstream, from where it is most abundant toward where it is rare. An upstream movement of verbal dexterities would be unusual, at least, and perhaps impossible; certainly it would not be expected. In a horizontal conception, in contrast, eloquence is conceived as a heterogeneous human faculty with diverse manifestations, one that is shared among all and that flows in multiple directions through an array of modalities. The expectation is that many participants will emulate many different qualities of a wide variety of discourses, and that influence will move in all directions throughout the network in a recursive and ultimately untraceable flow.

Within a classroom practicing a horizontally oriented mimesis, a majority of the texts presented as exemplars will not have been produced by privileged straight white males, and indeed it may be that none of them are. As students animate these diverse perspectives, they may become less narrowly committed to their previously habituated subject positions, and more open to inhabiting others. Perhaps most importantly, they would become adept at switching among various perspectives, among voices and points of view, and thus become more inclined to enact the perspectival flexibility that is at the core of both a rhetorical education and robust democratic citizenship. Instead of reinscribing hierarchies, a horizontally oriented *imitatio* would aim to animate the ambiguities of mimesis that Wilson and Bhabha describe so that students may be called upon to draw into question and disrupt those hierarchies.

Conclusion

In the tenth book of his *The Orator's Education*, Quintilian, perhaps our tradition's most enthusiastic *imitatio* evangelist, acknowledges that the pedagogy does have its drawbacks. Specifically, *imitatio* can exert a conservative

influence, encouraging reproduction rather than innovation, so that the status quo is reduplicated rather than reimagined. As he sometimes does in other cases, Quintilian finesses his response. But perhaps he does so because he realizes that there is no universally sufficient defense against this critique, which indeed persists into the present day. Because it frames the practice of imitation as a pedagogical anchor that limits advances in teaching and learning, this critique may be another reason for the decline of imitation as a foundational rhetorical pedagogy. Other additional possible culprits include "(1) the myth of progress, (2) the Romantic emphasis on genius, and (3) the technological mindset" (Sullivan 15), and "our attention to writing processes" (Farmer and Arrington 12). Probably all of those suspects are worthy of the interrogations that they have received in the vast literature about *imitatio*.

I have been addressing another reason to be distrustful about the potential value of imitation in the contemporary classroom: it would seem to be incompatible with a rhetorical education designed to address, and to promote, a culture of diversity. Imitation runs the risk of reinforcing narrowly linear habits of mind that potentially exclude more complex and indeterminate exchanges, even as it may also reinforce the very hierarchies and structures of privilege that any even moderately progressive pedagogy would seek to challenge.

In this brief essay, I have responded to this critique in a limited and specific way by sketching two attitudes toward mimesis. The first entails pulling back from a commitment to dyadic engagement in favor of a more pluralistic mode of exchange. Mimesis in a multivalent conversational idiom acknowledges the multiple sources and manifold exchanges that result in, and result from, every rhetorical event. The second reorienting attitude presented here aims to shift mimetic pedagogy from an implicitly vertical alignment, wherein students strive to emulate works which are judged to be more eloquently elevated in relation to their own level of achievement, to a horizontal alignment wherein the goal is an expansion of perspective in addition to, or as a means of achieving, a technical improvement of prose. Both of these attitudes may be understood as expressions of a pedagogy that privileges the invention of citizens with inclusive and capacious scope, who are suspicious of calcified hierarchies, and who go forth with the adaptable propensity to sustain, through imitation, a diverse and unsettled public culture.

Both of these attitudes also facilitate a further quality of mimesis, one alluded to by both Wilson and Bhabha: mimesis affects not only the imitator but also the imitated. When texts are the subjects of mimetic attention, they cannot be merely coopted because they also are talking back; imitation is a two-way street. As Michael Leff notes, in a mimetic engagement "the old text left its impression on the rhetor's product, but the rhetor's productive act also left its interpretive impression on the

original" (Leff 98). Or, as Rita Copeland has it, "in the act of inspecting a model and receiving its impress, the imitator in turn stamps or impresses his own features upon the model" (Copeland 27). *Imitatio*, in other words, presents an interface through which students of rhetoric might affect the structures of culture. Mimetic pedagogy can encourage a transformative critique of the status quo, a disruptive exposition of hierarchy, and a manifestation of more expansive, inclusionary discourse. The two attitudes that I have sketched here are intended to draw the attention of teachers and students of rhetoric to some of the ways that the productive ambiguities of *imitatio* might be recovered and deployed toward the invention of such discourse as well as toward the cultivation of citizens who can produce them.

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