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Reproducing Virtue: Quintilian, Imitation, and Rhetorical Education

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ABSTRACT

Quintilian does not offer an explicit mechanism that connects eloquence and ethics. This essay suggests that this omission is a consequence of the significant role that imitation plays in Quintilian’s pedagogy. This essay further suggests that the particular habits of mind that are cultivated through imitation are those that are associated with civic virtue, and it offers some ways that civic virtue might be cultivated in contemporary classrooms through a pedagogy that relies on imitation.

Near the beginning of the first book of Quintilian’s masterwork, the *Institutio Oratoria*, he clearly states his purpose: “I am proposing to educate the perfect orator, who cannot exist except in the person of a good man. We therefore demand of him not only exceptional powers of speech, but all the virtues of character as well” (1.prooemium 9).¹ Near the end, having provided a thorough condensation and review of Latin rhetorical theory and pedagogy, he begins his twelfth volume by reiterating that he is not describing merely “the type of style which [the] ideal orator is to use” but also the “moral principles” that such an orator should follow (12.1.4). Thus bookended, and as emphasized throughout, Quintilian’s *paideia*—his comprehensive educational program designed to produce ideal citizens—is intended to provide not merely techniques useful in the production of eloquence, but a program of liberal education essential to the formation of character.

But the indisputable brilliance of this monumental work orbits around a central question that its author avoids answering directly: What is the relationship, using Quintilian’s terms, between “speaking well” and being a “good man”? Put another way, what is the relationship between eloquence and ethics, or communication and character? Does the training required to produce good writing or speaking also encourage students to become good people? Is virtuosity some evidence of virtue?² Richard Lanham refers to this as the “Q” question, after “its most famous

nonanswerer” (155), and casts it as one of the central questions posed to, and by, the humanities. This brief essay does not claim to uncover a heretofore unnoticed answer that Quintilian provides for the question that Lanham has named in his honor. Instead, I argue that one reason that Quintilian does not answer the “Q” question is his reliance upon the imitation of texts as his foundational pedagogical tool. Because the practice of imitation that Quintilian describes is intended to avoid the limitations of a pedagogy bound by explicit rules and routinized mechanisms, it is not designed to provide an explicit formula that links education in character and in communication. Rather than a flaw, however, Quintilian’s reliance upon imitation offers clarity about what sort of virtue may follow from the acquisition of virtuosity, and as such offers insight about the value of imitation in contemporary language education.

The Latin word for the pedagogical practice that Quintilian advocates is *imitatio*. It consists, most simply, of using exemplary texts as models for the production of new texts. The process generally is divided into two activities, *analysis* and *genesis*: students analyze, or are led by their teacher in an analysis of, a model text that possesses some attributes worthy of emulation, and then are assigned the task of generating a text of their own that possesses these same attributes. In practice, however, these two activities are so thoroughly interrelated that they are experienced as “a virtual simultaneity” (Still and Worton 6–7); as they work, students learn to shift their attention between the model text and their own textual performance in a seamless oscillation that blends the two activities into a single inventional practice (Corbett 245). The new texts generated by the students might parallel, mirror, or otherwise be informed by various qualities of the original, including its inventional strategies, dispositional structure, stylistic choices, remembering of cultural values, audience adaptation, and so on, but are shaped by the rhetorical situation addressed by the students.

While it may seem evident that composition can be aided by imitating strategies that someone else has used successfully, it may be less clear that character can be improved by acting like someone else.³ While imitation may seem like a reasonable pedagogy to improve students’ linguistic virtuosity, in other words, it may seem more problematic as a means of developing virtue. We have inherited—both from Romantic notions of linguistic self-expression and from neoliberal notions of isolated self-reliance—a tendency to believe that character formation is a matter of more effectively articulating one’s individuality rather than of duplicating identities articulated by others (Fantham 115; Crowley 26; Sullivan 15–16; Farmer and Arrington 23–24). Within this context, a pedagogy such as the one that Quintilian describes might seem inadequate to the task of cultivating character.

Two points of clarification are in order. The first is that Quintilian is referring to the cultivation of *civic virtue*, the publicly performed habits of thought and speech that are designed to benefit not only the individual but also

the community. This is virtue that is manifest in public thought and action, rather than in quiet introspection or dialectic inquiry. This first point requires elaboration, because of course there was little if any opportunity for the public enactment of this sort of virtue at the time that Quintilian was writing, during the reign of Emperor Domitian (Kennedy 131). This apparent contradiction, between Quintilian's conception of virtue as a public or political construct and the limited possibility for the expression of civic virtue in the late first century, is a continuing point of interest in the literature. Michael Winterbottom, for example, suggests that Quintilian is responding to, and offering a prudently subtle critique of, the delimited and debased state of rhetorical practice in his day (96–97), while Prentice A. Meador, Jr., suggests that Quintilian believed that the time was “ripe for a rebirth of eloquence” (166). Teresa Morgan helps to account for this contradiction by observing that the various activities that Quintilian describes for his ideal orator are an “odd mixture . . . some of which we associate with the Republic and others with the Principate” (252). In this view, Quintilian may be understood as a political idealist, and his *vir bonus* as fitted most properly neither to a republic nor to an empire but to some bestcase combination of the two (see also Brinton 182). This assessment seems compatible with Quintilian's insistence, throughout the *Institutio Oratoria*, that the value of a rhetorical education is cashed out in public engagement with civic others in the service of a common good, and not in private contemplation of isolated rectitude. He seems to have found a way to retain his aspirational goals for the study of rhetoric while still recognizing its limitations in his present time. Even if his treatise “fails to give the young student much practical help,” he concludes, he hopes that it “will at least—and this is more important to me—give him good intentions” (12.11.31).

The second clarification follows on the first, and in part upon the contradiction that it generates, and it is that for Quintilian civic virtue appears to rely on a flexible adaptability rather than on a rigid moral code. The capacity to speak well, as acquired by the ideal rhetorician, entails an ability to improvise and to adjust to the demands and expectations of particular rhetorical situations. This is a tempered idealism, then, one that permits the student of rhetoric to be prepared to adapt to the expectations of almost any context, even those not immediately manifest. It seems that *imitatio*, rather than adherence to rules and precepts, is particularly well-suited for developing this sensibility. These two points of clarification are addressed in the next two sections of this essay, beginning with a brief overview of *imitatio* in classical rhetorical theory and then returning to Quintilian's conception of the relationship between rhetoric and virtue.

Rhetorical Imitation

In Book 10 of Plato's *Republic*, he famously bans the poets—and to some extent, the practice of imitation has been burdened with that banishment

ever since. The perfect city that Plato is imagining would be free from “anything which is in any way imitative” (10.595a) because such practices are incapable of producing truth; they offer only simulations of it—or, worse, only simulations of simulations. Plato has Socrates explain, for example, that imitation produces works that are “at a far remove from reality” because they are capable of merely latching on “to some small aspect of each object and this is an image” (10.598a–c). Art produced through imitation, as a result, simply cannot provide access to true virtue, but can present only distracting simulacra of it. Plato is not concerned that poems *intentionally* lie, in other words, but rather that, as products of a mimetic art, they *necessarily* lie.

In his rejection of imitation, Plato is referring to human attempts to represent nature, which also is what Aristotle refers to in his *Poetics*.⁴ The rhetorical tradition emphasizes another sense of imitation, however, with a lineage that extends to the Sophists, Isocrates, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, and to Cicero, Quintilian’s favorite authority. In contrast to the sort of mimesis that Plato condemns, the form of rhetorical imitation referred to as *imitatio* does not invite students to treat art, or the artifacts of public culture, as deceptive simulacra to be cast aside in order to apprehend the truths that they conceal, but rather to attend carefully to these artifacts to discover the ways that they engage the values, strategies, and common knowledge of their makers and their audiences.

Donald Lemen Clark reminds us that throughout classical rhetorical theory “belief in the value of imitation” for the teaching of eloquence “was undeviating” (13). Its benefits were universally recognized, in part, because it was understood to refer not to slavish duplication but instead to a fundamental component of invention. *Imitatio*, in this conception, “is not the mere repetition or mechanistic reproduction of something found in an existing text. It is a complex process that allows historical texts to serve as equipment for future rhetorical production” (Leff, “Hermeneutical Rhetoric” 201; also Jasinski 329). Unlike the copying of manuscripts done by monks in their scriptoria, the goal of *imitatio* in a rhetorical *paideia* is not the preservation of previous knowledge but the invention of new expression. Indeed, the point was not merely to find new ways to say old things, but to introduce students to an inventional resource that would enable even those who felt they had nothing to say to discover things that might be said (Clark 21).⁵

Notice that one consequence of a mimetic pedagogy, therefore, is the inversion of a conventional understanding of the relationship between creativity and expression, wherein the first is considered primary to the second: first you come up with something to say, and then you find a way to say it. Within a mimetic pedagogy, as W. Ross Winterowd puts it, “manner forces matter. When the student has internalized a grammatical device [through *imitatio*], [she or] he has also acquired a ‘mechanism’ that can generate an original thought. Style is the manner of matter” (167; see also Farmer and

Arrington 18). This ground-level recognition that all discourse necessarily is developed in response to other discourse, and that the production of effective rhetorical discourse depends upon the painstaking analysis of effective rhetorical discourse, may in fact be the difference between “creativity,” as it is conventionally conceived, and “invention,” as it is developed in the rhetorical tradition.

Rhetorical Virtue

If *imitatio* is to be understood as a rhetorical pedagogy that contributes to the cultivation of character, then it is significant that Quintilian understands rhetoric itself as a quality of character—as a civic virtue (2.20.5). When Quintilian defines rhetoric in Book II, he acknowledges that it has been called, among other things, a “power” (*vis*), “capacity” (*potestas*), or “faculty” (*facultas*), but that he favors the Greek term *dynamis* (2.15.3–4)—which has no very accurate English translation but combines connotations of the other terms.⁶ While each of these terms carries a different nuance, none of them suggests that rhetoric exists only as a material object awaiting discovery in the natural or human-made environment, but instead that rhetoric also, or even primarily, is an internalized aptitude and inclination. Whether conceptualized as a power, capacity, faculty, or *dynamis*, though, rhetoric in this sense is a quality or attribute that can be acquired or developed by human beings. Rhetoric is not merely a phenomenon to be studied, in other words, but a faculty to be cultivated. It follows, then, that success in rhetoric does not, as Quintilian makes clear, “depend upon the outcome” of a persuasive effort, to be tallied up in a win/loss column, or even in the production of beautiful prose, but instead is realized when manifest in a good person speaking well (2.17.23–24). Quintilian explains that rhetoric is more like dancing than it is like astronomy or painting; unlike a “theoretical” art, such as one that aims at an enhanced understanding of the night sky, or a “poetic” art, such as one that culminates in a tangible representation, rhetoric “is achieved by action and, once the act has been performed, nothing remains to do” (2.18.1–2). Rhetoric is a habit of mind that is manifest in human action, so that the ideal orator that Quintilian describes does not merely “speak well” in the sense of achieving some external persuasive objective, but is a person whose discourse is a reflection of, and a performance of, an internalized capacity for ethical judgment.

Quintilian begins his most sustained discussion of *imitatio*, in Book 10, by stating that one goal of a rhetorical education is the building up of “a stock of ideas and a stock of words”—but he urges that this is not to be accomplished by memorizing long lists of synonyms, as some do, but instead “by reading and hearing the best models.” He is careful to point out that the goal is not merely to store up “a crowd of words” but instead to develop the “judgment”

to know when and where particular words might best be used; any word “may be the best possible word somewhere or other,” so the trick is not merely to know a lot of them but to know when and where they might most effectively be deployed. The goal is to enable students to produce forceful oratory, he reminds his readers, and “not the patter of a street trader.” To produce this pedagogical effect, students have to see and hear these words *in situ*, taken up in the throes of rhetorical action, to “understand not only their meanings but their forms and rhythmic values” (10.1.5–10).

Quintilian discusses the benefits of studying poetry, history, and philosophy, providing a thorough review of what he would consider to be the essential canon. Importantly, however, orators should not make the mistake of imitating those styles in speeches, for “each genre has its own law” (10.2.21–22). The best source of imitation for orators is oratory, and the reason for this is that these texts provide a more vivid mimetic experience. When “everything is alive and stirring,” when voice, gesture, and “the whole performance” is all adapted to a particular purpose and audience, then our emotions may be kindled as though presented “not just by a representation of things, but by their reality” (10.1.15–17). Notably, Quintilian’s observation here actually encompasses both forms of mimesis—it is because a discourse produced in the heat of rhetorical battle is more mimetically satisfying in Plato’s poetic sense that it serves as a more suitable model for imitation in Quintilian’s rhetorical sense. Discourse intended to address a live audience about a real issue is more vivid because it bears the mark of a *rhetor* attempting to reflect the particulars of a rhetorical situation. When students imitate such a text, they have access not only to the words themselves but also, through the words, to the “reality” that the words were crafted to address.

Quintilian points out, however, that *imitatio* should not “be restricted to words” but should encompass “the propriety with which the great men handle circumstances and persons, their strategy, their arrangement, the way in which everything (even what seems to be a concession to entertainment value) is aimed at victory” (10.2.27). To emulate rhetoric as a rhetorician is to attend to communication as the linguistic residue of a rhetorical encounter among speaker, audience, and topic, and as a seemingly static remainder of a live negotiation. For example, though Cicero is, for Quintilian, “a synonym for eloquence itself,” so apt a model that should a student come to love Cicero, that in itself should be taken as evidence of progress (10.1.112), neither he nor any other single orator should be merely copied. Indeed, Quintilian tells us that it is a “disgrace” to produce copies that merely reproduce the same effect as the original (10.2.7).

Another danger of attending to words merely as words is that it may result in “producing an image of excellence, a mere outer skin, as it were.”⁷ Students should not limit themselves to studying only the “superficial

impression made by a speech,” but instead should study it “in depth.” Mimetic texts produced after a merely superficial study of the original run the risk, as Quintilian puts it, of being “turgid instead of grand, meager instead of concise, rash instead of bold, decadent instead of rich, jerky instead of rhythmical, careless instead of simple” (10.2.16).⁸ Note that in each of these pairs of adjectives, the difference is not only one of degree but also one of judgment; an ability to differentiate between rashness and boldness, for example, or between decadence and richness, does not depend on either memorization or mimicry but instead on an ability to tell, in a particular situation, how much is too much. This flexible adaptability, which Quintilian variously associates with judgment, strategy, good sense, and prudence (6.5.3–11), is the hallmark of the ideal orator, far exceeding in importance knowledge of rhetorical lore (2.13.9). Indeed, Quintilian refers to improvisation as the “greatest fruit of our studies, the richest harvest of our long labors,” and as a skill so essential to the ideal orator that the person who does not possess it “should ... give up public work” (10.7.1).

For Quintilian, then, rhetoric is not defined by “a set of laws ... bound by immutable necessity” (2.13.1). In fact, he reminds us repeatedly that it is impossible to master the art of rhetoric merely by learning rules and precepts as they are set out in textbooks (2.5.15–16, 12.6.7). Perhaps most surprisingly, for someone who evidently was a master teacher in every respect, Quintilian insists that not everything that is required to achieve eloquence can be taught directly. “To *teach* everything that art can effect is an impossibility,” he tells us, meaning that it would not be possible for him, or any teacher, to introduce students to every possible or potentially effective strategy—but if students have “acquired the principles of imitation,” then they gain access to a virtually infinite supply of models and exemplars (7.10.9). Imitation is able to teach what the teacher cannot, namely the variation, nuance, and sensitivity to rhetorical situations that are among the most fundamental attributes of the ideal orator. Textbooks and the lists of precepts they contain may be fine as far as they go; Quintilian never suggests that they are not useful, only that they are not sufficient. They can introduce rhetoric as a compendium of general rules—but it principally is through imitation that rhetoric, understood as a faculty or capacity, can be absorbed by the student.

Three primary pedagogical practices that are central to an imitative pedagogy, and that foster the connection between textual replication and ethical emulation, are paraphrase, translation, and memorization (Terrill). In this context, Quintilian’s commentary on translation and paraphrase are best taken together. He recognizes that many Greek terms cannot be translated exactly into Latin, so that “when we translate them, we are free to use the best possible words, for the words we use will all be our own,” and the same is true as well for figures and ornaments, “because Latin idiom is often different from Greek” (10.5.3). The slippage between the original and the translation,

in other words, provides an opportunity for invention, as the student must discover, or sometimes devise, terms in the new language that are similar, but never quite equivalent, to the old. Paraphrase, similarly, leads to the realization that it is “impossible” to imitate an original completely while putting it in different words (10.5.8). It is useful even for students to paraphrase their own texts, reshaping their thoughts “just as one shape after another can be made out of the same piece of wax” (10.5.9). Most significantly, Quintilian does not imagine the text that results from paraphrase “to be a mere passive reproduction, but to rival and vie with the original in expressing the same thoughts” (10.5.4–5). Far from being a diminished copy, the paraphrase competes on equal footing with the original, as a second offering understood not as derivative or inferior but as complete in its own right. Both translation and paraphrase, then, aim at the cultivation of inventional facility rather than duplicative redundancy.

Quintilian’s comments on memorization even more forcefully emphasize its value for the formation of character. For younger students, he notes that doing the harder work of memorizing another’s words will make it easier to perform the less-challenging task of memorizing their own, and that once they have locked the “best models” into their minds, “they will now unconsciously reproduce the style of the speech which they have so thoroughly absorbed” (2.7.3). Having internalized their models, students will be able to draw from them “spontaneously,” selecting the most valuable and useful elements from their “hoarded treasure” of rhetorical resources (2.8.3–4). When extolling the virtues of imitation for older students, Quintilian similarly warns that “the man who knows what to say and how to say it, but does not have his eloquence ready to hand and prepared for any contingency, will simply be brooding over hoarded treasure” (10.1.2). Quintilian’s pragmatic sensibilities are clear: the rhetorical treasure accumulated through the absorption of exemplars is not intended to be admired, but spent, and its value depends largely on the judgment exercised in its spending. Taken together, then, Quintilian’s commentary on translation, paraphrase, and memorization indicate that imitation provides a practice through which the qualities of an exemplary text can be utilized in the invention of texts, and the qualities of an exemplary *rhetor* might be utilized in the cultivation of rhetors. This is the way that rhetoric may be described as a virtue: it is a manifest performance of ethical judgment.

Implementations

I have suggested that Quintilian offers a compelling defense of the use of imitation as a pedagogy for language instruction, and that he continually connects this pedagogy to the formation of character. The question for the contemporary teacher, however, is how to implement this pedagogy. The

students that we are presented with in our twenty-first-century classrooms probably are even more firmly prejudiced against imitation than those in Quintilian's time, as they are products of a popular culture that prizes individual creativity. The notion that *imitatio* is a valuable tool for the formation of character may be a hard sell. The way around this obstacle, and a way that I believe is firmly in keeping with Quintilian's spirit, would be merely to proceed as though no such obstacle exists. Set students to work translating, paraphrasing, and memorizing texts, and they will come to see the value in such exercises just as Quintilian's own students did, centuries ago.

Quintilian follows Aristotle in framing imitation as a foundational human capacity.⁹ To be sure, Quintilian does not believe that imitation is the only way that a teacher of rhetoric should proceed, and he recognizes its limitations—it would be difficult for any art to progress, for example, through imitation alone (10.2.8–9)—but he understands, as many effective teachers do, that exploiting the natural tendencies of one's students can be an especially fruitful strategy. Quintilian actually seems to regard a strong tendency to imitate as a quality of particularly educable students, provided that they do not squander their energy on getting laughs (1.3.1). And the natural power of this mimetic tendency is one reason that the very best teachers should be employed, even from the earliest days of a student's education; students can't help but imitate their mentors and it should go without saying, Quintilian reminds us, “how much better it is to absorb the best models” (2.3.1).

In considering the implementation of these ideas in the contemporary classroom, it is instructive to think about the ways that the three primary pedagogical strategies that Quintilian associates with *imitatio*—translation, paraphrase, and memorization—might be adapted. Translation may present the greatest challenge, as most of us can count on most of our students being monolingual English speakers. Just as Quintilian's thoughts on translation and paraphrase are best taken together, it may be best for contemporary teachers to emphasize the points of overlap between these two activities. For example, students might “translate” a text intended for one audience, situation, or purpose into one intended for another audience, situation, or purpose. The further the conceptual distance between the original and the translation/paraphrase—across time, space, and culture—the more room is opened up for the development of the inventive powers of the students. Quintilian warns that students should be invited to emulate “the excellences of a number of authors” so they do not become narrowly wedded to a single style; for the contemporary classroom, this reminds us that students should be confronted with a wide variety of models—written and spoken, past and present, marginal and elite, radical and reactionary, verbal and visual—thus encouraging the development of a profoundly flexible capacity for linguistic invention.

Memorization, perhaps even more so than translation and paraphrase, is routinely vilified as a contemporary pedagogical practice, perhaps because it is indelibly linked to the mindless, oppressive, soul-killing repetition that many of us associate with the worst of archaic schoolhouse instruction. But as with translation and paraphrase, Quintilian helps us to recover the practice, to see that memorization need not be mindless but can be *mindful*. For one thing, the memorized text should be emphasized as an inventional resource upon which students must learn to rely when improvising their own rhetorical responses to specific situations and audiences (10.7.9). Students should be invited to understand that the ultimate goal of memorization is not the flawless repetition of the original, but the ability to call upon the original at opportune moments.¹⁰ And perhaps more importantly, through exercises in memorization in the service of *imitatio*, students are encouraged to understand that the practice of bringing into our own consciousness someone else's words does not mean that we are losing ourselves but that we are gaining the perspective, experiences, and linguistic expressions of another. Feeling someone else's words in our mouths, without fearing that our own voice is lost, surely is among the most essential democratic practices.

Conclusion

Quintilian helps us to perceive that imitation, properly conceived, is never merely a passive exercise in the reproduction of words but always an active endeavor in the production of character. A simple implication is that we should select our exemplars with care, mindful of their potentially transformative power for our students. A somewhat more challenging implication, perhaps, is that the very practice of imitation imparts habits of mind and speech that are constitutive of civic virtue. As students become adept at adapting, adopting, and appropriating the rhetorical resources made available in communicative acts produced by others, they learn both to understand themselves as situated within a web of discourse and to make their way within that web, which surely are among the most valuable of virtues. But the most challenging implication, for those of us dedicated to the study and teaching of rhetoric, may follow from Teresa Morgan's suggestion that Quintilian was a political idealist, because that suggests that we need not limit our pedagogy to the goal of equipping citizens for productive engagement with the existing public culture, but that we might also prepare them for more ideal public cultures. Imitation and the *paideia* based upon it, in other words, are capable of not merely maintaining or reproducing the status quo but also of improving it toward something more equitable, ethical, and eloquent.

“Everything in this field of study,” Quintilian insists, referring to rhetoric, “needs to be subjected to the most careful judgment” (10.2.14–17). It is judgment, in the form of an embodied power, capacity, or faculty—not a treasure house of words or an encyclopedic knowledge of precepts—that makes eloquence possible. And through the pedagogical logic of *imitatio*, it is the painstaking study of eloquence that cultivates judgment. Students must analyze the textual traces of rhetorical judgment in order to appreciate, assess, and emulate that faculty in the production of their own texts. Quintilian uses a particularly vivid metaphor to describe the connection between analysis and genesis, one that positions *imitatio* clearly as a technique through which judgment might be internalized: “We chew our food and almost liquefy it before we swallow, so as to digest it more easily; similarly, let our reading be made available for memory and imitation, not in an undigested form, but, as it were, softened and reduced to pap by frequent repetition” (10.1.19). Imitation is not a matter of merely copying the surface structures of the original text, but rather of breaking down the original into its component nutrients and absorbing those elements into oneself so that they may fuel future thought and action. The original texts become a part of the students, infused throughout their character, informing their decisions and discretions, endowing their capacity for judgment. It is in this way that model texts become the food of eloquence.

Lanham is correct that Quintilian never directly answers the “Q” question. While Quintilian does consistently insist that cultivating a good person is connected to learning to speak well, he never provides a mechanism, explicitly described, that links character and communication. The closest that he comes is perhaps in Book 2, where he asserts that the sort of rhetoric that he has in mind, that “which befits a good man and really *is* rhetoric, will be a virtue” (2.20.4–5). His proof, unfortunately, consists of an unsatisfying run of circular reasoning: rhetoric is a virtue, for example, because a bad person would not be able to produce an effective oration; rhetoric is a virtue because it concerns the one quality that distinguishes humans from all other animals, which is the power of speech; rhetoric is a virtue because Cicero says that it is (2.20.8–9). Quintilian seems convinced that there is some necessary connection between ethics and eloquence, between virtue and virtuosity, but he seems oddly incapable, or unwilling, to articulate what exactly that connection may be.

This essay has not discovered this connection. But it does suggest at least a part of the reason that Quintilian does not describe it: providing an explicit mechanism would be inconsistent with his repeated insistence, at almost every opportunity throughout the entire work, that codified rules and precepts are insufficient. Students who would be eloquent should know the rules, but the rules alone are not going to make students eloquent. Quintilian is not interested, as he puts it, in developing rhetoric as a “*mutam scientiam*” (5.10.119), a mute science, a body of theory incapable

of expression and, thus, incapable of public engagement (Leff, “Idea of Rhetoric” 98). It is fitting, then, that Quintilian avoids detailing an explicit formula or theory that would link virtuosity and virtue and offers instead something of a pedagogical *topus*, in parallel and overlapping with inventional *topoi*. Michael Leff notes that inventional *topoi*—basic categories, templates, or heuristics for discovering things to say about a subject—should be understood not as “theoretical principles” that channel and limit rhetorical invention, but instead as training devices that help to “develop a capacity for arguing in precisely those situations where theory offers the least guidance” (“Up From Theory” 208). In this sense, *topoi* are understood not as places where arguments might lie waiting to be discovered but rather as perspectives or approaches that drive the work of rhetorical invention in situations that exceed the limitations of theory. Similarly, for Quintilian, *imitatio* provides not a codified procedure through which rhetorical training might be interfaced to character building, but rather a practice which, if allowed the liberty to range widely across the rhetorical canons—*inventio*, *dispositio*, *style*, *memory*, and *delivery*—provides a point of view that allows virtuosity and virtue to become coextensive. A pedagogy grounded in imitation, as Quintilian imagines it, blurs distinctions between theory and practice, breaches perceived barriers between the classroom and the public sphere, and dissolves rigid divisions between the cultivation of character and the formation of fluency into a fluid and dynamic interdependency.

The key to understanding the significance, and the intellectual commitments, of Quintilian’s educational program is his conception of rhetoric as a faculty, capacity, or *dynamis*, rather than as a mere practice or artifact. The goal of his rhetorical *paedeia* is neither the ability to compose beautiful phrases nor the potential to win arguments, but the formation of an ethical person who would be recognized through the production of ethical speech. Through techniques associated with *imitatio*, including translation, paraphrase, and memorization, students are brought into close contact with exemplary rhetorical practices and tasked not merely with appreciating them but with emulating them through the production of discourses designed to compete with the originals. These are precisely the skills most needed by contemporary students, who face a bewildering and relentless barrage of ever-morphing communicative practices. The purpose of these exercises is not at all to acquire an ability to mimic the words of others, but instead to cultivate the capacity for discerning the strategic and prudential judgment through which effective communication is crafted. No other training can eventuate in this capacity, Quintilian insists, so well as *imitatio*.

A particularly pernicious contemporary narrative about the value of the liberal arts is that they present the ideal of learning for its own sake. Nowhere does this notion appear in Quintilian; in fact, Quintilian is insistent, on

numerous occasions, that in the educational program he is formulating the practice of imitation must not be allowed to degenerate into an arid romp through the pleasures of duplication. *Imitatio* is valuable only to the extent that it is understood as preparation for civic engagement—its treasures are meant to be spent—and in fact it is understood as the practice that best prepares us for the liquid, protean, and volatile discursive flux that characterizes contemporary civic culture. Quintilian has provided a blueprint for an ideal and all-encompassing rhetorical *paideia* that would be at least as challenging to re-create in our own time as it would have been in his, but one that we would do well, to the extent that we can, to emulate.

Notes

1. Throughout, all quotations from Quintilian are from the Loeb Classical Library edition, edited and translated by Donald A. Russell.
2. I borrow the elegant formulation linking “virtue” and “virtuosity” from Lanham (169), who is quoting Deirdre McCloskey.
3. Here, and throughout, when I refer to “composition” I mean to refer both to speaking and to writing. Murphy points out that Quintilian understood speaking and writing (and reading and listening) to be “inseparably related,” so that if any one of them is neglected then the others cannot be developed to their fullest (“Introduction” xxxv; “Roman Writing Instruction” 33). Murphy specifically refers to Quintilian 10.1.1-2; compare 1.4.2-3.
4. Auerbach provides the most thorough study of this form of mimesis. Another form of mimesis sometimes is referred to as “cultural mimesis,” which concerns the ways that human cultural practices are understood to be comparable; on this, see Taussig.
5. This is not to say that *imitatio* completely ignores the value of finding new skins for old wine. As Crowley points out, students often are expected to “strive to perfect the presentation of an old theme through adding, changing, or omitting” (Crowley 24).
6. This is the same word that Aristotle uses in his famous definition of rhetoric in the second chapter of the first book of his *Art of Rhetoric*. “Let rhetoric be [defined as] an ability [*dynamis*], in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion” (1.2.1).
7. Quintilian likens these outer skins to the shapes that Epicurus theorized evaporated from material objects, impinging upon our senses to stimulate perception.
8. Compare Quintilian’s description, in Book 12, of the eloquent speech produced by the mature orator, which would be characterized by “greatness, not excess; sublimity, not hazardous extravagance; boldness, not rashness; severity, not grimness; gravity, not heaviness; abundance, not luxuriance; pleasure, not abandon; grandeur, not turgidity” (12.11.80).
9. Aristotle says that “it is an instinct of human beings, from childhood, to engage in mimesis” (*Poetics*, 1448b.4–8).
10. An excellent example of this ability is when Robert F. Kennedy addressed a mostly African American audience in Indianapolis on April 4, 1968, the day that Martin Luther King, Jr., was shot and killed. In this raw and painful moment, with little preparation, Kennedy is able to recite a few lines from Aeschylus that help to articulate his feelings, and those of his listeners.

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