

Quintilian, *Progymnasmata*, and Rhetorical Education Today

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ABSTRACT

There has been a surge of scholarly interest lately in the *progymnasmata*, those ordered exercises in composition that played such an important role in rhetorical education from antiquity to the Renaissance. Comprising an integrated program in literary, civic, and moral effectiveness, they offer a compelling alternative to language arts pedagogy today, which seems too often driven by the goal of “college and career readiness.” But to be truly useful as a pedagogical model, the *progymnasmata* need to be embedded in something like the comprehensive educational philosophy of Quintilian’s *Institutio Oratoria*.

A notable feature of the *progymnasmata* revival of the last quarter century is that Quintilian, the great Roman educator of the first century CE, has played such a minor role in it. At first, this relative absence might seem to make sense, given that the *progymnasmata*, those rhetorical exercises so central to literary-oratorical education from antiquity to the Renaissance, originated long before Quintilian, in Hellenistic educational circles, and attained their standardized form and greatest influence long after, and largely independent of, him, in Greek Imperial and Byzantine contexts and, later, through Latin translation of Greek texts, in medieval and early Modern Europe.

In fact, most recent scholarly treatments of the *progymnasmata* have located the standard sequence of exercises in a fairly narrow corpus: four Greek treatises from the first to the fifth centuries CE, all from the eastern half of the Roman Empire, and all products of a long, Hellenistic pedagogical tradition. If a non-Greek source is mentioned, it is usually either Priscian’s Latin translation of Hermogenes or later Latin translations of Aphthonius. And it’s not just that Quintilian is not typically a key source in talking about the *progymnasmata*; his more expansive educational philosophy can seem uncongenial to the highly programmatic nature of the *progymnasmata*. Or, to put it differently: in their practicality, the *progymnasmata* offer a more

teacher- and student-friendly curriculum than the ambitious “liberal arts” approach of Quintilian.

But this divorce of the civic humanist and progymnasmatic traditions of pre-modern rhetorical education has been a mistake. In fact, one of the earliest sustained treatments of the *progymnasmata*, in any language, is Quintilian’s *Institutio Oratoria*.¹ At 1.9, 2.4, and 10.5, he includes more than a dozen of the canonical exercises, in an order not radically different from what would later become standard, treating each exercise in ways familiar from the received tradition; and he gives the sequence as a whole an important place in the oratorical curriculum that he carefully apportions between *grammaticus* and *rhetor*. Though the total space given to the exercises is brief, and though most of the *Institutio* is organized around the canons of rhetorical *art* rather than the means of *acquiring* that art, Quintilian clearly approves of the *progymnasmata* (which he calls “*primas exercitationes*” at 2.4.36), seeing them as indispensable in giving young students rich verbal input, of moral, literary, and rhetorical relevance, and helping them produce their own texts, from simple stories to full-scale arguments modeled on actual public life.

But I think there’s more to linking Quintilian and the *progymnasmata* than just expanding the latter’s bibliography. The exercise sequence can serve as a kind of lesson plan for, or curricular appendix to, Quintilian, for whom the *acquisition* of rhetorical art, by adolescents and young adults, can sometimes get lost in his fulsome treatment of theory, his deep sensitivity to the indeterminate demands of real-world oratorical situations, and his abiding idealism about the ultimate purpose of rhetorical education. The ambitious art of Quintilian, in other words, is, with the *progymnasmata* (and the declamation exercises that followed), actually *practiced*.

By the same token, the *progymnasmata* need Quintilian. In most cases, as they’ve come down to us, they’re just a series of classroom exercises, defined and subdivided, with suggested lines of development. Quintilian embeds that assignment sequence in a comprehensive philosophy of education—literary, moral, and civic—that spans childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood. In other words, if student growth, through mundane classroom practice, risks being neglected by Quintilian’s dense treatment of art, his careful attention to circumstance, and his high ideals, the *progymnasmata*, in their turn, if unattached to any larger educational project, can promote a fetishizing of exercise at the expense of moral character and civic purpose.

My goal here, then, is to read the *progymnasmata* Quintilianistically, and to read Quintilian *progymnasmatically*. Only thus, I believe, can we glimpse ancient rhetorical education at its best—and from there begin to imagine how that tradition might inform and inspire the reform of language arts education today.

The *Progymnasmata*

The *progymnasmata* were rhetorical exercises preliminary to (i.e., *pro-*) the full-scale exercises (or *gymnasmata*) of declamation (i.e., *suasoria* and *controversia*). They were widely used in the literary-oratorical education of adolescents and young adults in the ancient Greek and Roman worlds and in medieval and early modern Europe. Over the centuries, a dozen or so exercises were collected and sequenced into a years-long, multifaceted language arts curriculum, spanning what we would call primary, secondary, and tertiary education, though the program was most closely linked to the education of middle- and upper-class boys from, say, twelve to eighteen years of age, during the adolescent span between basic “grammatical” training and the demands (professional, political, educational, etc.) of adult life. *Progymnasmata* were especially prominent in the “public” schools of the Hellenistic, Imperial, and Byzantine Greek worlds, where the most popular collections of *progymnasmata* were developed; but they also had influence on Roman Republican and Imperial schooling and, later, through Latin translations of Greek textbooks, in the European Middle Ages and Renaissance. Even in eclipse, the *progymnasmata* left their imprint not only on Western education but on Western literature and even, perhaps, on the Western mind itself.²

In the most widely used sequence, there were fourteen exercises, listed here with examples from Aphthonius:

- (1) **fable** (*mythos*): a brief fictional tale meant to give advice, often involving animals, e.g., “The Crickets and the Ants”;
- (2) **narrative** (*diégêma*): the exposition of an event, mythic or historical, e.g., “Aphrodite and the Rose”;
- (3) **saying** (*chreia*): an elaboration of the words or actions of a famous person, e.g., “Isocrates said that the root of education is bitter but the fruits are sweet”;
- (4) **maxim** (*gnômê*): expansion of a common proverb or aphorism, e.g., “Welcome the coming, speed the parting guest”;
- (5) **refutation** (*anaskeuê*): the overturning of a well-established fact or belief, e.g., “The story of Daphne is improbable”;
- (6) **confirmation** (*kataskeuê*): the proving of a well-established fact or belief, e.g., “The story of Daphne is probable”;
- (7) **commonplace** (*koinos topos*): amplification of a good or (more commonly) an evil, e.g., “Against Tyrants”;
- (8) **encomium** (*enkômion*): a discourse of praise, e.g., “Thucydides”;
- (9) **invective** (*psogos*): a discourse of vituperation, e.g., “Philip”;
- (10) **comparison** (*synkrisis*): a discourse of contrast, e.g., “Achilles and Hector”;

- (11) **characterization** (*êthopoeia*): imitation of the character of someone, e.g., “What Niobe would say on the death of her children”;
- (12) **description** (*ekphrasis*): a discourse bringing something vividly into view, e.g., “The temple in Alexandria”;
- (13) **thesis** (*thesis*): an investigation of both sides of an abstract issue, with one side favored, e.g., “Should one marry?”; and
- (14) **law** (*nomou eisphora*): advocacy of or opposition to a law, treating both sides, e.g., “That an adulterer should be killed if caught in the act.”

In the extant textbooks, there is variation both in the number and sequence of exercises; and, in one text, additional activities (reading aloud, paraphrase, amplification, etc.) appear in a kind of appendix. The treatises usually include subtypes of each exercise, schemes of development to help students produce their own texts, and, in one case, model exercises for imitation. Aphthonius’s treatment of the *chreia*, or “saying,” for example, delineates three subtypes of *chreia* (“verbal,” “active,” and “mixed”), suggests an organizational scheme using eight “headings” or topics (praise of the author, paraphrase of the saying, defense of its truth, refutation of its opposite, proof by analogy, proof by example, proof by testimony, and an epilogue exhorting readers to emulate the author), and provides a model *chreia* based on a saying by Isocrates, with a paragraph devoted to each topic (Kennedy, *Progymnasmata* 97–99). In the classroom, teachers must have supplemented this basic apparatus with fuller explanation and analysis, additional examples, criticism, and much practice.

At its best, the *progymnasmata* tradition represents a remarkably comprehensive language-arts curriculum, combining reading, writing, speaking, and listening; integrating literary, moral, and oratorical development; and scaffolding students’ rhetorical growth from short, simple, narrative tasks to long, complex, argumentative ones. The series bridged the basic education in reading and writing supervised by the *grammatikos* with the full-scale declamation exercises taught by the *sophist* or *rhetor*. And it inculcated young students in the history, values, and conventions of their community while also preparing them for the two-sided *agon* of adult legal, political, professional, and civic life. Each exercise trained students in a different and relatively self-contained literary-oratorical genre (like encomium or description), but it also built on prior exercises and anticipated later ones. By the end, the system gave the budding orator all the building blocks needed, presumably, for mature rhetorical facility.

Where did the program come from? Although our fullest sources for the *progymnasmata* are all from the first few centuries after Christ, many of the exercises had a long history before that, in ancient Greek rhetorical training; and the program as a whole likely predates the textbooks we have by several hundred years. In archaic Greek contexts of the Homeric era, growing up must have included much imitation and performance of epic poetry. Young

children, or at least boys from noble families, would have learned the fables, myths, and stories of their ancestors, and young men would have learned to make ceremonial speeches like *encomia*. Later, in the classical period, especially in the emerging democratic *poleis* of Greece, ambitious young men would have practiced two-sided argument and extemporaneous speaking on any topic put to them. With the advent of “mass” literacy in postclassical Greece, “schools” emerged in which adolescent boys, having learned their letters and memorized their Homer, would have engaged in activities like paraphrase and amplification and even learned some basic rhetorical theory.

The word “*progymnasmata*” first appears in the late fourth century BCE *Rhetoric to Alexander* (1436a25), where it implies some use of “preliminary exercises” in rhetorical education. In fact, George Kennedy argues that, “A course of elementary exercises in composition probably developed in schools in the fourth century” (*Progymnasmata* xi). Interestingly, Jeffrey Walker devotes two chapters of his recent book *The Genuine Teachers of This Art* to reconstructing what he calls the lost *technê* of Isocrates, which, in his account, would have included, among other things, something like the exercises of the progymnasmatic tradition: maxim and *chreia*, fable and narrative, refutation and confirmation, description and comparison, *ethopoiea*, commonplace and thesis, encomium and law (99–121).

By the Hellenistic period, as rhetoric itself became increasingly institutionalized, a standard sequence of exercises emerged in the schools. Although the needs for political rhetoric declined after Alexander, the role for rhetoric in education expanded, through what Kennedy calls the process of *letteraturizzazione* (*Classical Rhetoric* 1-5). We should be careful, though, about belittling the rise of “school rhetoric” in this story of decline (Fleming, “Finding a Place”; Fleming, “Rhetoric as a Course of Study”; Fleming, “Very Idea”; Woods). In any case, by the first century BCE, there is not only strong evidence for the role of *progymnasmata* in Greek schooling, it is clear that the pedagogy had spread to Roman contexts. Cicero, the author of the *Rhetorica ad Herrenium*, and Seutonius all attest to this (Kennedy, *Progymnasmata* xi–xii). By the first century BCE, argues Kennedy, “virtually all Greek and Roman students were practiced in progymnasmatic exercises in grammar or rhetoric schools” (*Classical Rhetoric* 27).

Once we get to the Common Era, we no longer need to make conjectures about the rhetorical curriculum. There are four extant sources for the *progymnasmata*, all Greek, all written for teachers, students, or both, and all from the first to the fifth centuries CE. They are attributed, respectively, to Theon of Alexandria (first century CE), although Malcolm Heath has proposed a different, later Theon from the fifth century CE; Hermogenes of Tarsus (second century CE), although that treatise is now usually attributed to a later author, Pseudo-Hermogenes, from the third or fourth century CE; Aphthonius of Antioch (fourth century CE); and Nicolaus of Myra (fifth

century CE). Kennedy's 2003 translation of all four Greek texts, the only complete English edition available, also includes a translation of the influential commentary on Aphthonius's *progymnasmata* by the ninth-century Byzantine scholar John of Sardis (*Progymnasmata*).

As mentioned earlier, the treatises differ, not only in the number and sequence of exercises but also in their general approach: Theon is written for teachers and includes an appendix of general literate activities, like reading aloud and paraphrase, that span the exercises; Pseudo-Hermogenes gives us the earliest, simplest version of what would become the standard sequence; Aphthonius includes model essays and, for that reason, became the most popular progymnastic textbook in late antiquity and the Renaissance; and Nicolaus is the only treatise to explicitly link the exercises to the five canons and three genres of classical rhetorical theory. Otherwise, they are remarkably alike. All attest to the important role of a relatively uniform, graded series of composition exercises in primary and secondary education in the ancient Greek and Roman worlds.

There are also many lost textbooks of *progymnasmata*, mentioned in the above and other sources. And there are extant collections of model *progymnasmata* themselves, the largest being the 144 short essays, including examples from all fourteen of the standard exercises, by the fourth-century CE sophist Libanius of Antioch, the teacher of Aphthonius, a collection recently translated into English by Craig Gibson. There are also collections of *chreia* edited and translated by Ronald Hock and Edward O'Neil. More recently, scholars have begun translating and analyzing the many ancient *progymnasmata* found among Egyptian papyrus fragments (see, e.g., Kremmydas).

The heyday of the *progymnasmata* was late antiquity and the Byzantine Empire. On the one hand, this is a period often described as rhetorically decadent; on the other hand, it is a time when education, especially in the Greek-speaking world, was literary-oratorical to its core, when eloquence, both playful and purposeful, was the central skill and marker of elite culture (see, e.g., Webb). But even after this heyday, the *progymnasmata* had, as Penella puts it, a *Nachleben* (77). In the Latin West, Priscian's early sixth-century CE translation of Hermogenes' "*praexercitamina*" kept the *progymnasmata* alive in the European Middle Ages (see, e.g., C. Lanham); and in the Renaissance, there was an extraordinary surge of interest, across Europe, in Aphthonius, whose textbook went through 114 printings in ten separate Latin translations between 1507 and 1680 (Clark, "Rise and Fall" 261–262). There was even a much-printed English version by Richard Rainolde that came to America with the Puritans in the early seventeenth century (on the Renaissance use of the *progymnasmata*, see also Abbott; J. Henderson; Lang; Sloane). The program didn't survive the rise of science, though, according to Clark ("Rise and Fall"), and by the eighteenth century had fallen out of educational favor, though the influence of the *progymnasmata* can be seen in later theme writing in the schools and colleges of modern Europe and North America.

We are dealing, in other words, with a curriculum that can be traced for more than two millennia, across multiple languages and throughout Europe, southwestern Asia, and even North America. The *progymnasmata* were thus an extraordinarily durable educational project, influential in more ways than one. First and foremost, the exercises were an effective training regimen for public speakers, whose *copia* of words and things was developed through the program's constant imitation, paraphrase, illustration, refutation, and amplification and who internalized an ideology of linguistic performance that centered on the commonplaces of a convention-loving culture but also encouraged endless verbal variation, that celebrated poetry and storytelling but also embraced two-sided political and legal argumentation. "The type of individual this education produced," writes Ruth Webb, was "relentlessly eloquent, able to compose a declamation on any theme, often at a moment's notice, thoroughly imbued with the classical past" (289). In Robert Penella's words, going through the ancient curriculum, both the preliminary and declamation exercises, is what made a boy *pepaideumenos*, "a fully educated man" (77).

The *progymnasmata* were thus as much about morality as about skill in public speaking, about learning and extolling the values of one's community, its famous characters and their deeds, its fables and maxims, its received ways of praising virtue and denouncing vice. In Craig Gibson's recent analysis of the way the composition and moral pedagogies of the *progymnasmata* worked in tandem, the program provided instruction not just in rhetorical form and technique but in the "elite values" of the world outside the classroom: as teachers transmitted the values of that culture to their students, the latter "absorbed, imitated, and then actively reproduced those values in their own written and spoken compositions" (4). For Gibson, two ethical questions underlie the curriculum: "First ... on what shared principles may human actions and attitudes be clearly, persuasively, and elegantly described and evaluated in writing and in speech? And second ... how can the young man most effectively be acculturated so as to enact these moral principles in word and deed?" (5).

Finally, the *progymnasmata* influenced literature itself. Practiced so extensively in narration, description, comparison, and the other moves of the standard sequence, students and teachers came to appreciate such linguistic performances independent of any external purpose. These "micro" or "miniature" rhetorics (the phrase comes from John of Sardis, as quoted in Penella 79) began to take on lives of their own, appearing in literature as self-contained parts of other discourses or even as stand-alone works of art. Penella points to the preponderance of encomia in ancient literature: the thesis-like essays of Plutarch's *Moralia* and the comparisons in his *Lives*, the way Pliny could build a letter around an *ekphrasis*, and Ovid's speeches-in-character (89).

Putting all three of these influences together, we can say, with Kennedy, that the *progymnasmata* were “the source of facility in written and oral expression. . . . In addition, the compositions inculcated cultural values, as well as understanding of conventional literary forms” (*Progymnasmata* ix).

The attractions of the exercises, even today, are evident. Language-arts teachers are drawn to their multiyear span, their diversity of discourse types, their sequencing of tasks from short to long and simple to complex, their scaffolding of student work within each exercise, their integration not only of reading, writing, speaking, and listening but also of civic, moral, and literary development. In my own classroom use of the *progymnasmata*, students are often surprised that they even exist, so simple yet so well developed, so long-lasting yet so completely unknown to them. They are used to thinking that anything premodern must be at best quaint, at worst ridiculous, and that history is a story of progress from an unsophisticated past to the “best of all possible worlds” present; that the hardest, best developed, and most valuable educational projects are all in mathematics and the sciences; and that literary-oratorical education is either romantic or mechanical in orientation, composition occurring either by mysterious inspiration or by simple recipe, one method inaccessibly inventive, the other unimaginatively dull, with little of value in between. They hunger, I believe, for a language-arts education that can help them be less afraid of speech, less intimidated by writing, that can help them be more resourceful, more articulate, and lead more fulfilling *public* lives.

And, in my experience, they find the exercises to be like a series of increasingly intricate linguistic games. They get better at them as they go, realizing that the best way to approach the sequence is through a playful spirit that has, I’m afraid, largely disappeared from language-arts curricula today. With the *progymnasmata*, students learn to perform, on a kind of stage, stylized versions of themselves and others; they glimpse there a public life that is more participatory, more consequential, and, frankly, more fun, than the one they see in the news. Working through the *progymnasmata*, they discover a verbal facility they did not know they had.³

Of course, any proposal to adapt the *progymnasmata* to the (post)modern classroom had to wait first for a *scholarly* revival of the exercises. It was only recently, at least in the United States, that we had good, accessible English translations of the relevant treatises, as well as a body of literature on their historical development, social context, literary influence, and modern relevance. How and why did this revival occur? Manfred Kraus has argued that, by the nineteenth century, “the progymnasmata had all but disappeared from the scholarly agenda. New interest only emerged with the rediscovery of the early modern history of the progymnasmata in a short article by Clark” (1397), the 1952 article about the Renaissance popularity of Aphthonius that I cited above. But the issue of *Speech Monographs* in which that article appeared also included an English translation of Aphthonius by Ray Nadeau

and an article on the teaching of rhetoric in French Jesuit colleges that mentions the *progymnasmata* (Lang); so the “rediscovery” was clearly more than just Clark’s doing. Interestingly, Henri Marrou’s influential *Histoire de l’Education dans l’Antiquité*, which treats the *progymnasmata* at length, appeared in French in 1948, but none of the American authors above mention him (the first English translation of Marrou appeared in 1956). Notably, these early accounts of the *progymnasmata* by Marrou, Clark, and others are often disparaging (Clark says of the exercises, for example, that they “must have been a torment to schoolboys” [“Rise and Fall” 259]).

The real revival came later. Kraus writes that “In the very last decade of the twentieth century there was a major surge of scholarship as the *progymnasmata* suddenly became the object of intense international and interdisciplinary research” (1397). This revival clearly benefitted from the wider revival of classical rhetoric itself that had taken place in the preceding decades, from the 1950s to the 1980s. But regardless of how it came about, in the last couple of decades, we have had an outpouring of new English translations of the *progymnasmata* (e.g., Gibson, *Libanius*; Hock and O’Neil; Kennedy, *Progymnasmata*; Kremmydas), a surge of historical scholarship (e.g., Gibson, “Better”; Kraus; Penella; Walker; Webb), and, perhaps most surprising of all, calls to rethink contemporary rhetorical education through the *progymnasmata* (e.g., Comprone and Ronald; D’Angelo; Fleming, “Very Idea”; Hagaman; Ray; Sigrell).

In fact, accompanying the belief, among some scholars, that the rhetoric revival has too often ignored or disparaged rhetoric’s own school tradition, there has been growing concern about the poverty of modern K–16 language-arts pedagogy. For many of us, the linguistic, rhetorical, and literary education of children and young adults today is too often driven by the single mantra of “college and career readiness,” a criterion defined almost exclusively in terms of basic reading and writing skills, with both “creative” writing and public speaking neglected; students, at least in the United States, are increasingly tested on their ability to write under pressure in a narrow range of school-bound discourse types (e.g., the five paragraph theme); and teachers have had to modify classroom work in the language arts in the face of that pressure. The classical tradition can help us re-imagine such language-arts education in richer, deeper, more humane ways; and the *progymnasmata* are a simple way to make that case, illustrating what rhetorical education might look like from a very different, more “practical” orientation.

And yet, in the spirit of the *progymnasmata* themselves, which so effectively trained young people in the rhetorical habits of two-sided argumentation (see, e.g., R. Lanham; Leff; Mendelson; Sloane), we must also acknowledge the *limitations* of such an educational program. The very stability of the *progymnasmatic* tradition, from Hellenistic Greece to early

modern Europe, suggests that it was a highly conservative pedagogy in a culture given to educational inertia.⁴ Joy Connolly has written, for example, about the “archaizing orientation” of the *progymnasmata*, particularly in the voice and theme of student essays: “Steadfast disregard for current and recent events is the rule: from the perspective of these exercises, history virtually comes to an end with Alexander’s conquest of Greece” (350). And Todd Penner’s description of the “chain of mimesis” at the heart of ancient rhetorical education, in which students imitated not only their teachers but also “the classic exemplars of antiquity” and “the socio-cultural value system embedded in these exemplars” (qtd. in Gibson, “Better” 7), is an important clue both to what was so powerful about this educational system and what can make it seem so uncongenial to our own time. Even the very word used to encapsulate this ancient literary-oratorical educational program—*progymnasmata*—is objectionable: as my students always remind me, it’s so hard to say and spell!

So, to the question, are these ancient literary-oratorical exercises relevant for language arts education today, a reasonable first answer must be ... no.

Quintilian and the *Progymnasmata*

The story I’ve told so far has been about an educational project that was Hellenistic in its origins, Imperial and Byzantine Greek in its heyday, more literary than civic at its heart, more elementary than advanced in its level—a story about standardization and uniformity that is attractive in its way but limited, perhaps even irrelevant, in its application to late modernity.

But what if we add Quintilian to the picture? After all, in the *Institutio Oratoria*, he has much to say about the *progymnasmata*. Not only at 1.9, where he has the *grammaticus* leading boys through their fables, paraphrases, aphorisms, *ethologias*, *chriaes*, and poetical narratives; and 2.4, where the *rhetor* continues that training with historical narratives, confirmations and refutations, encomia and invectives, comparisons, commonplaces, theses, and laws; but also in book 10, where older students and adults continue to build rhetorical facility through reading, listening, imitation, writing, correction, translation, paraphrase, declamation, memorization, and improvisation.

In most of this, frankly, Quintilian is derivative. True, he is thoughtful about the importance of early instruction: “One cannot reach the top in any subject,” he writes, “without going through the elementary stages” (1.prooemium 5). He is also unusually careful about apportioning the exercises between the teachers of grammar and rhetoric. And, like Theon, he adds to the twelve to fourteen standard exercises the more general reading and writing activities of book 10. (For more on textual and other problems with the progymnasmatic passages of the *Institutio*, see I. Henderson; Viljamaa; Winterbottom). But, in the end, Quintilian

accepts the Greek program without substantial modification, and, in fact, there is little here that can't be found better, with more elaboration, and illustration, in the four extant Greek treatises we have from the eastern Empire. And Quintilian gives us nothing as simple, clear, and easy—as “teacher proof” we might say—as Aphthonius' *progymnasmata*, with the exercises clearly and concisely defined, analyzed, exemplified, and sequenced for young students.

But what Quintilian *does* with the exercises, his embedding of them in a lifelong civic-humanist project, is singular and impressive. After all, the twelve-volume *Institutio* is an astoundingly comprehensive, richly developed, and philosophically deep account of the making of a public speaker, from cradle to retirement; and it is unique in the rhetorical tradition for just this depth, detail, and comprehensiveness. Yes, we have here the graded series of preliminary exercises, from fable to law, as in Theon, Hermogenes, Aphthonius, and Nicolaus; but we have much else as well. There is, for one thing, an abiding concern for the *character* of both student and teacher and for their relationship and interaction; no “exercise” will work, in Quintilian's view, if the student is not ready for it and the teacher does not respond in a way that is appropriate and humane. These are *persons* working through the sequence of assignments, after all, and the curriculum cannot therefore be presented in a depersonalized way. From this point of view, there can be no “teacher proof” educational program because the teacher plays such a vital role in the development of the young student; by the same token, there can be no “exercise” without an actual pupil *doing* that exercise—reading, writing, speaking, listening, and developing in the process, becoming thereby a *different* person.

There is also art. After all, as Quintilian reminds us, natural ability may be necessary in public speaking, but it is not sufficient to make a true orator. For that, not only practice but also *study* is needed (2.12). Thus, the whole long middle section of the *Institutio* is taken up with an exhaustive, well-researched, and minutely detailed investigation of rhetorical theory, organized by the five “canons,” or parts, of rhetoric—though, as Donald A. Russell acknowledges in the “General Introduction” to his edition of the *Institutio*, other theoretical schemes compete for attention: the four issues of *stasis* theory, the three genres of rhetoric, the five parts of a speech, the three duties of an orator, the three kinds of style, etc. Nicolaus of Myra linked his *progymnasmata* to the five canons and three genres, but the progymnastic textbooks in general are largely innocent of theory—innocent, that is, of any technical meta-discourse concerning the invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery of public language that can transcend particular genres like encomia and comparisons, and help students think more *generally* about rhetorical performance. But, like Cicero and Aristotle before him, Quintilian does not just lay down

rhetorical laws, he studies them, citing historical sources, patiently considering and refuting alternative views, illustrating theory with classic exemplars, and applying theory to “real world” situations, including situations where it does not work. After all, true skill does not come from rigid, immutable rules: “The art of speaking depends on much effort, continued study, varied kinds of exercise, long experience, profound wisdom, and unfailing strategic sense” (2.13).

And this leads to a third way in which the *Institutio* embeds “exercise” in a larger, richer, more effective educational program than that provided by the extant progymnastic treatises: Quintilian’s constant concern for circumstance, occasion, and experience. Neither natural talent, nor exhaustive study, nor completion of a years-long program of exercise can fully prepare the young speaker or writer for the actual rhetorical demands of adult life, at least in the kind of demanding public culture in which Quintilian and other ancient rhetorical theorists and educators lived. If we err, as I argued above, in belittling the classroom tradition of rhetoric through nostalgia for the *agon* of golden-age Athenian democracy, we also err by imagining rhetorical education complete when the student has finished the schoolroom exercises of the *grammaticus* and *rhetor*. This is why Quintilian not only constantly situates rhetorical theory in the experience of actual orators and pleaders, including himself; he also returns, again and again, to the ongoing learning process of *adult* speakers and writers, the best-known examples being Books 10 and 12, where rhetorical education is undertaken by men long past the age of classroom exercise.

There is more. In addition to character, art, and experience, Quintilian provides an explicit, and startlingly ambitious, purpose for the whole enterprise, an end for rhetorical development that both humbles and inspires even today. Where most rhetoricians define the goal of rhetorical development from within rhetoric itself—that is, the formation of a more *skillful* public speaker and writer—Quintilian locates the end of his project at least partly *outside* of rhetoric, in the community’s need for *good* speakers and writers, where *good* is only partly comprehended by skill, is more importantly a *moral* consideration. The purpose of rhetorical education, from this point of view, is the making of a citizen who is *both* effective *and* wise. “Our orator,” Quintilian writes, must be “not only perfect in morals ... but also in knowledge and in his general capacity for speaking” (1.prooemium 18–19). This is, of course, the famous civic humanist project, and no one, not even Cicero, made it more central to his life’s work. For Quintilian, there can be no truly effective and worthwhile rhetorical education if there is no overarching social and ethical purpose for the long study and difficult practice required, a purpose that is worthy of eloquence itself. After all, if exercise only makes us better exercisers, what is its use?

Finally, Quintilian's educational program can be judged, in a way that few other educational programs can, by its own eloquence. Some of the best and most influential parts of the *Institutio* are, in this sense, performative—that is, not just *about* eloquence but actual models of it. Thus, Quintilian's exhaustive survey of definitions of rhetoric at 2.15 is also an eloquent example of how to define one's topic. His pro and con argument about whether home is better than school for the education of the young (1.2) is not just an important preliminary to the topic of his treatise—it is itself a model two-sided argument, even-handed yet persuasive. Perhaps most famous of all, Quintilian's moving account of the death of his eldest son, which appears so suddenly in the *prooemium* to Book 6 and seems such a genuine expression of the author's difficulty in completing his task in the face of life's tragic blows, can also be read as a model case of emotional pleading inserted at the very moment in the treatise when Quintilian takes up the role of emotion in the epilogue of speeches.

So, to practical classroom exercise, Quintilian adds character (or nature), theory (or art), real-world experience (or life itself), and an overarching civic purpose; and he does all this in a way that exemplifies the very eloquence to which he is leading his students. None of these other pedagogical elements can be found in any meaningful way in the extant progymnasmatic treatises—though we can't of course know exactly how teachers embedded those textbooks in classroom practice. Some of the treatises, Theon and Nicolaus, for example, clearly glimpse a wider view of rhetorical education. And even Pseudo-Hermogenes and Aphthonius, plodding as they often are, hint at more than they say. But, in the end, there is simply no comparison between these exercise books and Quintilian's richly developed treatise on the making of an orator.

But if the *progymnasmata* can be criticized as too often mere classroom exercises, the world of school simply spinning itself out again and again, Quintilian can be criticized as an empty ideal, the dreams of an old man nostalgic for a better but unrealizable world. Yes, he's eloquent, but can his demanding project be enacted in ordinary classrooms? And there's an even harsher critique that can't be entirely dismissed: Quintilian's own biography reveals a man who sometimes looks to us like a social climber from the provinces, given to sycophancy and flattery in order to find his place among the ruling class. Then, in retirement, he had the leisure and privilege to make high demands on and set impossible ideals for those who came after. True, Quintilian was a practiced advocate, a devoted teacher, a careful scholar, a man of genuine feeling who had known true loss. But, from a critical point of view, his lifelong educational vision, however unique, is no curriculum for the masses. It is, if anything, a kind of memoir of his own ambition. Can that really be a program for the rest of us?

Quintilian, *Progymnasmata*, and Rhetorical Education Today

What we're left with, then, are two ancient educational projects, each with evident virtues but also clear drawbacks. The *progymnasmata* still impress with their multiplicity, their sequencing, and their scaffolding, all of which seem so well designed to work students through increasingly complex linguistic activities. But the textbooks are silent on those larger considerations that animate the best educational programs—sensitivity to learner differences, commitment to teacher quality, appreciation for theoretical knowledge, an opening onto real-world experience, etc. In the end, it's a decontextualized assignment sequence, something that might be sold to teachers who can't design and implement a decent lesson plan themselves.

Quintilian, by contrast, gives us a much bigger picture: dedicated students, a deeply humane teacher sensitive to their differences, a rich theoretical apparatus, constant exposure to real-world experience, and, above all, a program of character development capable of inspiring our noblest efforts. But it's far from a classroom-ready syllabus for mass public education. In the end, the *Institutio Oratoria* seems like an educational scheme designed to instruct a single student, and he or she, the best that can be found anywhere.

But what if we combine the two projects? That way, we'd have before us an educational program with *both* high ideals *and* a lesson plan. As Quintilian says of teachers and students, "Neither is sufficient without the other" (2.9). From the *progymnasmata*, we'd get not just a series of speaking and writing exercises but the whole idea of exposing students to a multiplicity of genres or discourse types (literary, expository, and political), linked in a graded sequence from short to long, simple to complex, "creative" to political, with intricate scaffolding to guide student work in each exercise. From Quintilian, we'd get a deeply humane educational philosophy, a genuinely caring teacher sensitive to his students' needs, and the seriousness and excitement of a truly noble purpose for schooling. If we combine the two projects—let's call it "P + Q"—we'd have a workable *and* worthy language-arts curriculum, one that could help us re-imagine the rhetorical education of children and young adults today.

I alluded before to what many see as the barrenness of contemporary K–16 language-arts education, at least in the United States, with its overriding focus on the acquisition of basic literacy "skills," defined almost exclusively through the criterion of "college and career readiness" and measured primarily by standardized tests. In some ways, as education in the STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) has become richer, more highly valued, and better than in the past, education in the language arts appears to be languishing. Interestingly, a 2013 study by the National Center on Education and Economy found that high school students in the United States probably get

too much education in math these days, at least for the needs of college and work, and *not enough* education in reading and writing. According to the study, much of the high school mathematics that students are taught is math that they will never need in college or career, while the math they do need, largely elementary and middle school math, is never learned well enough for later success. The reading and writing currently required of US students in high school and the first year of college, meanwhile, is not complex or demanding enough, according to the study; and the performance levels students are expected to meet in such activities are surprisingly modest. The high-level literate capacities and experiences they need for the most challenging college courses and the most rewarding professional careers are, in fact, never acquired by most students in the United States (National Center).

We can compare this impoverished situation with the classical rhetorical tradition, which put grammar, literature, speech, debate, and composition at the center of schooling and expected high levels of knowledge, exercise, and performance from students in all those disciplines, from childhood all the way to adulthood. It was an insistently language-rich curriculum, developmental at its core and designed for student success. It was infused with both high ideals and the kind of scaffolding that helps students actually meet those ideals.

It was, above all, a hopeful educational program. As Quintilian reminds us again and again, attaining perfect rhetorical facility is exceedingly difficult, perhaps impossible. But the effort is worth it, even if we never reach the top. After all, “nothing makes for happy work as much as hope” (2.4.14).

Notes

1. All references to the *Institutio* are to Russell’s 2001 English translation.
2. My understanding of ancient Greek and Roman rhetorical education, and of the *progymnasmata* specifically, is indebted to Clark, *Rhetoric*; Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric and New History*; Lausberg; Marrou; Murphy; and Murphy and Wiese. Other sources are provided in the text itself.
3. I have taught the *progymnasmata* most recently in an upper-level undergraduate English course titled Rhetoric, Writing, and Society; the online syllabus can be found at <http://people.umass.edu/dfleming/english397R.html>. I provide a modern version of the *chreia* exercise, using a quotation from Martin Luther King, Jr., in Fleming, “Rhetoric and Argumentation” 254. One difficulty in teaching the *progymnasmata* today is the lack of good, inexpensive English editions. For a useful list of the *progymnasmata*, with concise definitions and brief examples, see Gideon Burton’s “Forest of Rhetoric” website at <http://humanities.byu.edu/rhetoric/silva.htm>. For online versions of Malcolm Heath’s translation of Aphthonius, see <http://www.rhetcomp.gsu.edu/~gpullman/2150/Aphthonius%20Progymnasmata.htm> and <http://www.personal.leeds.ac.uk/~cla6mh/rhetoric/Aphthonius%20Progymnasmata.pdf>. And for Lee Honeycutt’s online version of John Selby Watson’s 1856 English translation of the *Instituio Oratoria*, see <http://rhetoric.eserver.org/quintilian/>.

4. But the argument that the *progymnasmata* were *inherently* conservative can be taken too far. “Indeed,” as George Kennedy argues, “a major feature of the exercises was stress on learning refutation or rebuttal” (*Progymnasmata*, x; see also Sloane). Ruth Webb shows how convention was often subverted in the exercises; see, e.g., Libanius’ defense of the Homeric villain Thersites (301). As she puts it, the materials students used were to be *engaged*, not memorialized. Webb also adduces evidence to show that the *progymnasmata* themselves adapted to historical change; from Theon to Nicolaus, for example, they become more epideictic, less forensic (314).

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