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CHAPTER 78

Quintilian

The Perfect Orator

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Marcus Fabius Quintilianus (c. 35–100 C.E.) was a rhetorician of the early Roman empire. Born in the province of Hispania, he was brought to Rome in 68 C.E. by the emperor Galba and became a pleader in the courts. He was best known, however, as a teacher of rhetoric, leading a school which flourished under the Flavian emperors. In retirement, he wrote the twelve-volume *Institutio Oratoria* (*The Education of the Orator*), published around 95 C.E. The discovery of a complete text of this work in 1416 by the Florentine scholar Poggio Bracciolini was a major event in the revival of classical learning and the rise of humanist education. Especially influential was its pedagogical ideal: "the good man skilled in speaking" (*vir bonus dicendi peritus*). This union of rhetorical skill and civic virtue was not original to Quintilian; what he contributed was an educational program designed to form "the perfect orator."

The ethical claim for rhetoric has, historically, been a hard case to make. The young Cicero extolled the power of eloquence to bring people together and convince them to work for the common good (*De Inv.*, 1.2); no mute wisdom could do this, he wrote. But if wisdom without eloquence does too little good, eloquence without wisdom can do great harm, akin to putting weapons in the hands of madmen, as an older Cicero put it (*De Or.*, 3.55). Philosophers have often tried, therefore, to tame—even banish—rhetoric. But they have not always succeeded: in the liberal arts or "oratorical" tradition, rhetoric was the queen of subjects and the

central discipline of civic life. For the Greeks, its key figure was Isocrates (436–338 B.C.E.), who infused literary skill with respect for the demands of practical affairs and a preference for the great themes of deliberative oratory, especially patriotism. For the Romans, and then for Renaissance Europe, the key figure was Quintilian. His *Institutio*—the "largest handbook on rhetoric that has survived from antiquity"[1]—is really several books in one. It is, most obviously, a synthesis of theory, treating all five canons of traditional rhetoric (invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery). But that "handbook" is embedded in an utterly unique, cradle-to-retirement program of imitation and exercise, including an influential compendium of the "best authors" and advice on adapting one's thoughts and words to the conditions of public life. To top it all off, it is written in elegant classical Latin.

But what made Quintilian so durable is the pronounced *moral* tone of the project. As he claims early on, "I am proposing to educate the perfect orator, who cannot exist except in the person of a good man [*vir bonus*]. We therefore demand of him not only exceptional powers of speech, but all the virtues of character as well" (1.pr.9). The *vir bonus* "doctrine," explicated most fully in Book 12, has not, however, stood up well to scrutiny. It is seen as either empty, mere nostalgia for the lost eloquence of the republic, or derivative, a watered-down version of Stocism, for example.[2] For Richard Lanham, the *Institutio* is an exhaustive begging of the central ethical question of the oratorical tradition: can an education designed to form verbally skilled individuals also make them better citizens?[3] Quintilian does not so much show how that project can work, Lanham complains, as assume that it will.

Central Themes

But perhaps the place to look for Quintilian's moral project is not in the *vir bonus* doctrine at the end of the text but in the educational program that comprises its body. There, Quintilian makes two important moves: first, he re-defines rhetoric as an art not of persuasion but of speaking well, an activity judged by both practical *and* moral standards; and second, he unfolds a curriculum—lifelong, comprehensive, multiplex—designed to form individuals capable of engaging in that activity.

Traditionally, rhetoric's function has been tied to persuasion, to effects in the world; in fact, the most common definition of rhetoric, Quintilian writes, is "the power of persuading" (2.15.3). So seen, rhetoric's *telos*, or end, is outside the art, in its worldly outcomes: to be successful rhetorically is to win one's case. Quintilian, by contrast, defines rhetoric as "the science of speaking well" (*bene dicendi*

scientiam) (2.15.34), an art which "depends on the activity, not on the outcome" (2.17.25). Rhetoric's function, in this view, is not to achieve effects in the world but to speak well *regardless* of those effects. "The speaker certainly aims to win; but when he has spoken well, even if he does not win, he has fulfilled the demands of his art" (2.17.23). The word "well" is multivalent here; it means, at once, effectively, honorably, beautifully; the *scientia* thus includes both the virtues of speech and the character of the orator (2.15.34).

Importantly, the ground of this speaking is the public sphere—the senate, courts, army, etc.—where effectiveness is about grasping the situation one is in and taking advantage of it. But that activity is governed, ultimately, by the claims of honor (11.1.8ff). It is a tall order and Quintilian never denies that the project can go astray: that the skills of persuasion can be used for immoral purposes; that audiences can be ignorant, etc. He even allows himself to go part way down that road: let us grant that "some bad man has been found who is supremely eloquent" (12.1.23). But he always reigns himself in: *we will not call that man an orator*. As a teacher, Quintilian focuses on the good that oratory can do and the potential of his students to reach that ideal.

Which brings us to his second move. Having defined rhetoric as "the science of speaking well," Quintilian unfolds a program designed to form the "perfect" orator. "I shall combine," he writes, "a method of teaching which is not only intended to instruct students in the topics to which some teachers confine the name of 'the art' … but which can also nourish their powers of speech and develop their eloquence" (1.pr.23). The program lasts, literally, a lifetime, beginning when the child is born (1.1) and proceeding to retirement (12.11); and it is all-encompassing—incorporating, most notably, the moral instruction usually included under philosophy but which Quintilian claims as rhetoric's own (1.pr.11). High expectations are communicated throughout (e.g., 5.12.22), encouraging exertion because "even if we fail, those who make an effort to get to the top will climb higher than those who from the start despair" (1.pr.20). Lanham summarizes this *paideia* by giving it twin pillars: it was moral through and through ("Envaluation was everywhere in rhetorical education"); and it was centripetal, a unified program joining intellect and character and "built upon the student's experience through time" (657–58).

As for rhetoric proper, it too is multiplex. The largest part of the *Institutio* concerns theory, with detailed explications of doctrine (the chapter on delivery includes 23 hand gestures), numerous examples, and advice for practicing orators. But theory and use, Quintilian admits, have a complex relationship. There is, first, the risk of pedantry, a problem especially acute in rhetoric because art once learned is meant to be concealed; arguments should be judged true, not well put (4.2.38). Second, theory is insufficient for *facility*, which requires nature and

practice as well (3.5.1). Quintilian gives special attention to the latter. Athletes, musicians, orators—all know that they must continually strengthen their abilities or art will become mere "hoarded treasure" (10.1.2). Practice is key for another reason, because no matter how well art is learned, the variability of rhetorical situations escapes its control. Almost everything, after all, depends on the case (2.13.2).

There are three ways to develop facility. The first is *imitation*: acquiring capital to draw from when needed: "a stock of ideas and a stock of words" (10.1.5). But judgment is needed as well (10.1.8); students should therefore read only the best authors (10.1.20). Quintilian especially recommends Cicero (10.1.105ff). Besides imitation, there is *exercise*, which includes the activities known as the *progymnasmata* (1.9, 2.4): from fable to law, a well-worn scaffold for rhetorical growth. The final step is *declamation*: cases for which the student invents and delivers full-scale speeches, often on both sides of the question. Practice continues even after one leaves school: skill in improvisation, for example, "needs just as much study to maintain as to acquire"; Quintilian recommends speaking every day before an audience (10.7.24).

The "end" of all this exertion is the "good man skilled in speaking" (12.1.1), the man "who can guide cities by his counsel, give them a firm basis by his laws, and put them right by his judgements" (1.pr.10). Quintilian is clear-eyed about this speaker's needs, and he worries that schools provide "not arms to fight with, but a tambourine" (5.12.21). Let *our* orator, by contrast, "set his sights on winning, and learn how to aim for his opponent's vital places and protect his own" (5.12.22). Above all, the speaker needs to be honorable. The "Roman Wise Man," writes Quintilian, is skilled in the "activity of real life" (12.2.7), but he also has "the greatness of personality which fear cannot break, disapproval cannot dismay, and the authority of the audience has no power to inhibit" (12.5.1). In forming this person, Quintilian gives both advantage and honor their due: "the orator should keep two things in mind: what is becoming and what is expedient" (2.13.8). The two *should* coincide; but if they do not, "expediency must give way to propriety" (11.1.9)—though Quintilian can be permissive about the means of eloquence if the ends are "honorable" (see, e.g., 3.8).

Communication Ethics Implication

This union of rhetorical skill and civic virtue is hard to define, which is one reason Quintilian leans so heavily here on imitation.[4] But the concept is not incoherent. Public servants *should* be both honorable and resourceful. True, Quintilian sometimes seems simply to will such people into existence; but the *Institutio* tells a

fuller story: there is a verbal art to help speakers develop their causes, models of excellence to emulate, a store of words and ideas to deploy, a program of exercise to build facility, and a moral frame to elevate the enterprise. If students work hard, and teachers point the right way, then we have *some* reason to trust that future citizens will "speak well." Will that trust always be repaid? Of course not. But the rhetorical *paideia* remains the fullest expression we have of the idea that our best hope for good citizenship in one another is an educational system oriented to it.

Modernity has not been kind to this project, neither to its parts (theory, imitation, exercise), nor to its goal: the union of rhetorical skill and civic virtue. But the ability to "speak well" (and listen, read, write "well") remains a trait we need in one another. Fortunately, Quintilian's *Institutio* survives. If its wholesale adoption is unlikely (and undesirable), it is useful for more modest projects, like the revival of the *progymnasmata*. And it remains a powerful reminder that there are other ways, besides our own, to imagine public education in the language arts.

Further Reading

Quintilian. The Orator's Education. Trans. Donald A. Russell. 5 vols. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2001.

Notes

1. Jorge Fernández López, "Quintilian as Rhetorician and Teacher," *A Companion to Roman Rhetoric*, eds. William Dominik and Jon Hall (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 307–322.
2. Arthur E. Walzer, "Quintilian's 'Vir Bonus' and the Stoic Wise Man." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 33, no. 4 (2003): 25–41.
3. Richard A. Lanham, "The 'Q' Question." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 87, no. 4 (1988): 653–700.
4. Robert E. Terrill, "Reproducing Virtue: Quintilian, Imitation, and Rhetorical Education." *Advances in the History of Rhetoric* 19, no. 2 (2016): 157–171.