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Quintilian's Value for Modern Composition Theory and Teaching[1]

We still depend extensively on the ancient rhetoricians for our assumptions about the nature of composing and for our practices as teachers of writing. In some respects, that dependence has been fortunate and helpful, lending conceptual continuity to our work and reminding us of the persistent value of literacy in Western cultural history. In other respects, it has been less fortunate for our developing understanding of behaviors that the ancients lacked the perspective to notice and the tools to examine. If our dependence were altogether conscious and informed, perhaps the limitations of classical discourse theory would be less seriously inhibiting today and its potential more fully accessible. But the trouble is, many writing teachers are wholly unaware of what early rhetoricians actually said, and are therefore equally unaware of their impact on our pedagogical attitudes and methods. Too often, we perpetuate traditional beliefs whether they are serviceable or not, merely through force of unexamined custom, and on the basis of hearsay understanding or the poorly articulated, even at times grossly misleading, references in textbooks, not because we have studied, or even clearly recollected, the rhetorical tradition and learned its advantages as well as inadequacies for our own age.

I want to offer a sampling of the views of Quintilian, one of the greatest teacher-scholars in our field, in order to suggest some advantageous, but also some unfortunate, relationships between his thinking and our own. My aim is not to paint a full portrait but only to present a sketch as evidence of our need, as writing teachers, to become more conscious of our reliance on the ancient rhetoricians. That consciousness is important because we can use the richness of their thought to support and validate our own efforts. It is also important because we need to liberate ourselves, where appropriate, from the conceptual tyranny they exercise over us even when their notions have long ago become antiquated and unhelpful. I will distinguish four kinds of relationship between Quintilian's thought and that of contemporary composition teachers. The first is a beneficial agreement of views, where Quintilian offered attitudes and ideas that have withstood centuries of scrutiny and proven sound. Examples, to which I will return, include shared appreciation of the value and feasibility of universal literacy, the educability of even the youngest children, and the productive interplay between reading and writing in anyone's verbal development. A second relationship is beneficial disagreement between Quintilian and the present, where his thinking was insufficient and we have progressed in our understanding. We can profit from greater consciousness of

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important differences between ancient and modern speculation, seeing where research is today in light of where it has been and adjusting our teaching to reflect advances in conceptual sophistication. An example is our contemporary appreciation of the heuristic value of composing, where Quintilian's more limited concern, typical of classical rhetoric, was for the role of discourse in displaying a preconceived knowledge. Perceiving the disagreement, we gain perspective on our thought, confidence in our developing understanding of the nature of discourse, and motivation to distinguish a pedagogy that serves our ends from one which may not.

A third relationship between Quintilian's ideas and our own is the unfortunate and unproductive agreement of views, where faulty notions about composing or about ways to teach writing are perpetuated because of an unreflective, merely habitual acquiescence to traditional concepts. An example is our textbook exaggeration of the value of certain prefabricated formal shells, the five-paragraph theme, the so-called "definition" or "comparison/contrast" essay, the "topic sentence" paragraph, and so on, modern echoes of the classical preoccupation with the features and acceptable shapes of orations as ideal models for discourse. Modern research has suggested that form is something more organic and evolutionary than these static models, an achievement of the search for meaning, not a preconception at the start. Yet, we sustain a classical view of form, seemingly unaware of its limitations, as though more recent theory had raised no counterarguments. Finally, the fourth relationship is an unfortunate disagreement between Quintilian and the present, where he had a better idea or perspective to which we might profitably return, if only we were more aware of the quality of insight available in ancient rhetoric. Examples include Quintilian's healthy disdain for the static precepts in textbooks, and also his conviction that quality of thought is ultimately more important than mere formal propriety in student writing or any other. Again, in reviewing these varieties of interaction between Quintilian's thinking and our own, my larger point has to do with our consciousness of their existence. A knowledgeable, reflective awareness of our agreements and disagreements with the classical rhetoricians will always be enlightening and profitable, while ignorance of their impact or a lack of reflection on the nature of that impact, will always be regrettable, causing at once some missed opportunities for learning from the past and some instances of conceptual or methodological backwardness because of the unobtrusive tyrrany of outmoded belief.

Let me elaborate on the areas of agreement and disagreement I have sketched, and on their beneficial or unhelpful character as the case may be. Many of Quintilian's views strike responsive chords in teachers today. "Those who are dull and unteachable," he insists, "are as abnormal as prodigious births and monstrosities, and are but

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few in number." When a child's promise is lost, he says, the loss is "plainly due not to the failure of natural gifts, but to lack of the requisite care." It is false, he argues, that "the majority are so slow of understanding that education is a waste of time and labour." On the contrary, most people are "quick to reason and ready to learn," for "reasoning comes as naturally to man as flying to birds" (Institutio oratoria, I, i, 1-3).[2] Not only is everyone educable, he goes on, but they are so from their earliest years. Attacking the then popular view that "boys should not be taught to read till they are seven years old," he suggests that those "who hold that a child's mind should not be allowed to lie fallow for a moment are wiser." So, "let us not . . . waste the earliest years," especially since the capacity for "literary" training "not only exists even in small children," but is particularly engaged in childhood (Institutio, I, i, 15-20). Donald Graves, whose research on the composing processes of gradeschoolers is well known, will find some eager support for his views in educational theory of the first century, A.D.

Once children begin learning to write, according to Quintilian, energy of expression and intellectual adventuresomeness are more important than technical decorum or formal tidiness. "The young should be more daring and inventive, and should rejoice in their inventions, even though correctness and severity are still to be acquired. Exuberance is easily remedied, but barrenness is incurable" (II, iv, 5). Parents, he advises, should "avoid a dry teacher, even as we avoid a dry and arid soil for plants that are still young and tender. For with such a teacher their growth is stunted and their eyes are turned earthwards, and they are afraid to rise above the level of daily speech. Their leanness is regarded as a sign of health and their weakness as a sign of sound judgment, and while they are content that their work should be devoid of faults, they fall into the fault of being devoid of merit." The teacher should also be warned, Quintilian believes, that "undue severity in correcting faults is liable at times to discourage a boy's mind from effort. He loses hope and gives way to vexation, then last of all comes to hate his work and fearing everything attempts nothing" (II, iv, 8-11). No doubt, some few teachers today remain willing to stifle the spontaneous creativity of child writers with a neurotic regard for spelling and neatness, but we dare hope that the majority of us prefer rather to agree with Quintilian than to disagree.

Quintilian also emphasizes the importance of active rather than passive learning, where "the class will be led to find out things for themselves and to use their intelligence, which is after all the chief aim of this method of training. For what else is our object in teaching, save that our pupils should not always require to be taught?" And of course, "there are no subjects in which, as a rule, practice is not more valuable than precept" (II, v, 13-16). As

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students practice composing, they must work to develop intellectual penetration of a subject by exercising discernment in their choice of what to say and where and how to say it: "we must search for what is best and refuse to give a joyful welcome to every thought the moment that it presents itself." And naturally, "we must frequently revise what we have just written . . . For we love all the offspring of our thought at the moment of their birth . . . But we must give them a critical revision, and go carefully over any passage where we have reason to regard our fluency with suspicion" (X, iii, 5-7). "Erasure," Quintilian goes on, "is quite as important a function of the pen as actual writing . . . For we have to condemn what had previously satisfied us and discover what had escaped our notice" (X, iv, 1-2). Nancy Sommers would surely agree! Finally, improvement as a writer owes much to sustained reading as well as continued writing, both throughout childhood and later in life: "eloquence will never attain to its full development or robust health unless it acquires strength by frequent practice in writing, while such practice without the models supplied by reading will be like a ship drifting aimlessly without a steersman" (X, i, 2).

In all of these issues we sense our ready agreement with Quintilian's convictions. But we should not lose sight of the fact that the 2000 years separating us from the ancient rhetoricians have featured significant shifts of attitude beneath these points of evident similarity, including a massive epistemological reorientation beginning in the seventeenth century and continuing to our own day. Briefly, that shift has entailed a new view of the relationship between discourse and knowledge, overturning the ancient assumption that learning precedes articulation, and that the essential function of discourse is only to present knowledge apparelled in suitable language for a given occasion or audience. Beginning with Descartes and Locke, as I have argued elsewhere and as Edward Corbett has suggested in a recent CCC article,[3] language and learning come to enjoy a much closer relationship, each in fact dependent on the other, so that discourse assumes a heuristic function in the discovery of new knowledge. It is a commonplace of modern composition theory that writing is a learning process for the writer, a means of creating coherence out of the materials of our experience, a search for meaning, not merely a persuasive rendering of meanings already somehow preconceived. But this is not Quintilian's position, and we can profit from understanding the nature of the disagreement and the potentially beneficial effect our advanced conceptual sophistication can have on teaching. Quintilian states his case unequivocally: "in the natural course of things we conceive ideas before we express them" (IX, i, 19). This belief is institutionalized in the progression of the subdivisions of Ciceronian rhetoric from invention, where ideas are recovered (apparently from "places" where they had been

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previously stored), to disposition, where they are arranged, to elocution, finally, where they are expressed in language. This model of discrete intellective and later verbal stages assumes that we first learn our meaning and then convey it, that knowledge anticipates form, that "we must collect all our material and determine the proper place for each portion of it, before we begin to speak or write" (III, ix, 8). While some traditionalists continue to support such a view, many writing teachers have come to recognize the advantage of our modern emphasis on writing as a way of learning (though they may not know that it is several centuries old), and they have begun to modify their practice. Free writing, journal writing, the revision of successive drafts, and other activities that reveal the mind progressing slowly toward coherence through repeated experiments in verbal form have become more popular in enlightened classrooms, because of the shift of emphasis, while formulaic writing, the tedious, ceremonial recapitulation of what everyone already knows about capital punishment, is losing at least some of the stature it had enjoyed through centuries of declamatory exercises on worn-out themes. In this instance, we have a better idea than Quintilian had, so that our disagreement with him is advantageous and its character of significance to thoughtful writing teachers.

Unfortunately, of course, this constructive disagreement is not universally perceived or conceded among teachers. On the contrary, many of us continue to agree with Quintilian on some ideas which are not very helpful to our teaching and which depend on antiquated assumptions about the nature of discourse. When we ask students to compose hackneyed reiterations of the pros and cons of abortion by finding thesis statements, making outlines, employing comparison/contrast, definition, classification, exemplification, and what-have-you, fashioning topic sentences for successive paragraphs, dressing the prefabricated arguments in a decorous verbal style, and interring this now fully mummified body of thought in the mausoleum of a research paper, we are following ancient pedagogy with a consistency and devotion that belie any evolution in Western discourse theory over the past 350 years. Moreover, when the same textbook can devote chapter 1 to insisting that writing is a learning process, but then devote chapters 2 through 20 to categorizing prefabricated formal modes and artificial constraints far removed from the actual intercourse between thinking and verbal formulation, we learn, to our professional embarrassment I should think, how ignorance of the rhetorical tradition can lead us to misperceive the consequences of our advantageous disagreements with the past while simultaneously preserving classical ideas in an intellectual context which implicitly repudiates them.

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For Quintilian, writing is a species of ceremonial display. Hence, students should write on well-known themes, the forerunners of our abortion and capital punishment exercises: "For instance we may discuss the credibility of the story that a raven settled on the head of Valerius in the midst of a combat and with its wings and beak struck the eyes of the Gaul who was his adversary, and a quantity of arguments may be produced on either side." Later, "our pupil will begin to proceed to more important themes, such as the praise of famous men and the denunciation of the wicked." Students can also practice theses "concerned with the comparison of things and involving questions such as 'Which is preferable, town or country life?' or 'Which deserves the greatest praise, the lawyer or the soldier?'" (II, iv, 18-24). Much later, the really skilled orator can take on some trickier issues, for example "the case where the father disinherits a son born of a harlot because that son has married a harlot." "There are a number of pleas," Quintilian notes, "which the father may put forward with becoming affect" (XI, i, 82). We picture generations of young Romans discovering the value and purpose of discourse through these stylized and predictable intellectual non-adventures, much in the way that generations of young Americans are now exposed to the non-excitement of verbal discovery through five-paragraph renditions of the deeper significance of summer vacation, well punctuated. Across the ages, students have labored over such formal drills without regard for the power in language to enable true learning and communication about meaningful subjects. The historical miracle, under these circumstances, is that literacy has survived the onslaughts of instruction, that students have remained belligerently determined to read and write despite a concerted educational effort to reveal the full tedium and pointlessness of such activities.

In an environment where writing is valued chiefly as ceremonial display the preoccupation with decorum is understandable, and Quintilian is indeed concerned with the appropriate shapes of discourse and with correctness in the use of language. At issue in his pedagogical recommendations is not exploration of a subject through writing so much as attention to the ordering and expression of its content. A particular form of discourse, say the judicial oration, has a fixed number of subdivisions in a fixed sequence from exordium to peroration (III, ix, 1). Learning this authorized shape is a matter of socialization, even ethical development, and teachers from Quintilian's day onward have insisted on a great variety of superficial conventions in verbal behavior as much for the sake of perfecting students' ability to follow orders and observe public etiquette as for the sake of improving their capacities to think and write. Quintilian's description of the decorum of composing is loaded with the "oughts," "shoulds," and "musts," which similarly

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characterize modern prescriptivism, a signal that validated social behavior is the main focus of instruction. Hence, the exordium comes first and is always typified by certain features. It offers "an introduction to the subject," just as players on the lyre begin with a proem "which they perform to win the favour of the audience before entering upon the regular contest for the prize (IV, i, 1-2). The thesis statement must be located somewhere near the end of the introduction: "whether we intend to pass to the statement of facts or direct to the proof, our intention should be mentioned at the conclusion of the introduction, with the result that the transition to what follows will be smooth and easy" (IV, i, 76). Likewise with modern prescriptions on the importance of an introduction and the existence and placement of a thesis: we know perfectly well (I hope) that these conventions are highly stylized and quite unrelated to the making of coherence or the communicating of ideas; but we insist with Quintilian on their value for the socializing of students.

The "statement of facts" must come next, and it consists in "the persuasive exposition of that which either has been done, or is supposed to have been done, . . . a speech instructing the audience as to the nature of the case in dispute," which should always be "lucid, brief, and plausible" (IV, ii, 31). Quintilian believes that this part of the oration "more than any portion of the speech should be adorned with the utmost grace and charm" (IV, ii, 116). Obviously, the statement of fact corresponds roughly to the "background" section of a modern term paper assignment, again plainly a ceremonial ritual, not a constraint on composing. The later parts of the oration, proof, refutation, and conclusion, also have their counterparts, of course, in our so-called "body" and conclusion ("body" is perhaps the most remarkably unhelpful concept in composition theory since Aristotle's designation of something called "the middle," and it derives from the same product-centered perspective). The whole discourse, finally, must observe linguistic propriety, comprised of "correctness, lucidity, and elegance" (I, v, 1). The heavy ethical and political content of Quintilian's stylistic recommendations, no less than our modern academic prescriptions, is evident in his definition of acceptable usage: "I will therefore define usage in speech as the agreed practice of educated men, just as where our way of life is concerned I should define it as the agreed practice of all good men" (I, vi, 45). This equation would warm the cockles of John Simon's schoolmarmish heart.

The prominence of a ceremonial role for discourse in the schools and the exaggerated concern for superficial constraints reflecting the political and ethical underpinnings of instruction rather than our knowledge of the nature of composing, all demonstrate the continued negative influence of classical belief on modern teaching

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practices. The influence is negative because it institutes a false priority of technical decorum over the making of meaning, thereby compelling students to learn the niceties of "fine" writing before they have acquired any motivation to write at all. But we should not lay the blame wholly at Quintilian's door, for in fact we have exaggerated the concern for formal propriety well beyond his own estimate of its importance. It is, to be sure, his emphasis, proceeding from the ancient understanding of the relationship between knowledge and discourse, but teachers after him share responsibility, and with far less philosophical justification, for turning verbal decorum into a fixation. Time and again, Quintilian cautions us about too great a concern for precepts over practice, for tradition over common sense, for general rules over particular situations, and for inflexible formal shells over the purposes of writers and the needs of audiences. Yet today we have a pedagogy which places textbook abstractions near the center of instruction and which places mere formal expertise higher in importance than imagination. sound thought, and penetrating judgment. Here we have much to learn from a recollection of Quintilian's work, since his perspective on these issues appears far more intelligent than the one we seem to prefer today.

Given the ridiculous proliferation of textbooks in our field, Quintilian's observations about them deserve more than a causal reference. "As a rule," he writes, "the result of the dry textbooks on the art of rhetoric is that by straining after excessive subtlety they impair and cripple all the nobler elements of style, exhaust the life-blood of the imagination and leave but the bare bones, which, while it is right and necessary that they should exist and be bound each to each by their respective ligaments, require a covering of flesh as well" (I, Pr., 24). He insists that "practice without theory is more useful than theory without practice" (XII, vi, 4). "Let no one," he says, "demand from me a rigid code of rules such as most authors of textbooks had laid down, or ask me to impose on students of rhetoric a system of laws immutable as fate . . . as though they had no choice but to regard them as orders and as if it were a crime to take any other line . . . Most rules are liable to be altered by the nature of the case, circumstances of time and place, and by hard necessity itself. Consequently, the all-important gift for an orator is a wise adaptability since he is called upon to meet the most varied emergencies" (II, xiii, 1-2).

Beyond the aridity of textbooks, however, is, for Quintilian, the larger and more serious aridity of formal preoccupation at the expense of meaning, intellectual engagement, and the communication of the truth through writing and speaking well. "The ideal orator," he insists, "should have a genuine title to the name of philosopher,"

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and should be characterized "by virtue and the earnest search for wisdom." The speaker or writer must not merely use language well but use it in the service of valuable thought, right conduct, and ethical insight, "those themes which philosophy claims for its own. Who short of being an utter villain, does not speak of justice, equity, and virtue? Who . . . does not make some inquiry into the causes of natural phenomena? . . . it is surely the orator who will have the greatest mastery of all such departments of knowledge and the greatest power to express it in words" (I, Pr., 16-17). Orators "must learn not merely what is eloquent; it is even more important that they should study what is morally excellent" (I, viii, 4). In our terms, Quintilian is arguing for a certain qualitative relationship between what is said and how it is said, preferring the first to the second as a matter of cultural importance. When teachers comment disinterestedly on student essays that "your ideas are fine, but . . .," going on to detail all the formal and technical errors in the writing, they are showing their students that they value expression over thought. They are proving Plato right in his conviction that rhetoricians are dangerous and unscrupulous, interested only in persuading through technical manipulation, regardless of the merits of a case. Composition courses come distressingly close to vindicating Plato's misgivings because they institutionalize a shallow attention to form with little reference to substance. Perhaps in Plato's mistrust, and in Quintilian's advocacy of the orator who is first master of a subject and only secondarily master of the means to express its ideas to others, we find an early demonstration of the ultimate value of writing across the curriculum, as opposed to empty, formulaic exercises in composition courses which attract so much attention to writing as a subject in itself and so little to writing as an activity that allows for learning about a subject. In any case, we should learn from Quintilian a greater regard for meaning in our teaching of writing. We should also recognize the many other contributions he, and the classical tradition as a whole, have made to our enterprise. At the same time, we should acknowledge that the beginnings of rhetoric 2000 years ago did not also constitute the completion of that study. We have learned much since Quintilian, and some of what we know today goes further than what he knew. To become truly competent rhetoricians ourselves, and teachers of writing as well, we should be reflective about the uses and limits of his influential thought. Knowing something about our past, we make ourselves intellectually free, able to look backward for inspiration and support without falling blindly victim to the tyranny the past can exercise over those who forget their debt to it.

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Notes

[1]This essay is a revision of a paper presented at the CCC Convention in San Francisco, March 1982.

[2]I cite from the Loeb Library edition of Quintilian, 4 vols., trans., H. E. Butler (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969).

[3]See C. H. Knoblauch, "Modern Composition Theory and the Rhetorical Tradition," Freshman English News, 9 (Fall, 1980), 3-4, 11-17; see also Edward P. J. Corbett, "John Locke's Contributions to Rhetoric," College Composition and Communication, 32 (December, 1981), 423-33.

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