

The Far-Reaching Skepticism of Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria*, Book II

In spite of the charge that “Quintilian displays little understanding of philosophical theories” (Dominik 2003, 44), his *Institutio Oratoria* boldly advocates for a skeptical approach that extends not only to matters of rhetoric but to several intellectual endeavors. Quintilian argues that both rhetoricians and even geometers and natural philosophers merely “appear to know” the content of their respective disciplines. While scholars have noted Quintilian's skepticism in his discussions of rhetorical practice itself, they have not acknowledged the extent to which Quintilian expands his skeptical outlook to these other domains.

In Book II of his *Institutio Oratoria*, Quintilian takes on the task of responding to common objections to rhetoric's status as an art. One such objection claims that since rhetoric assents to falsehoods, it is not an art (*rhetoricen adsentiri falsis: non esse igitur artem*, II.17.18). Quintilian admits that “rhetoric does sometimes say untrue things as if true, but...there is a great difference between holding an opinion oneself and making someone else adopt it” (*rhetoricen nonnumquam dicere falsa pro veris, sed...longe diversum est ipsi quid videri et ut alii videatur efficere*, II.17.19). In this first defense of rhetoric, Quintilian implies that the rhetorician can understand and assent to his statements but that he may use falsehoods outwardly in accordance with the practical demands of persuasion.

In a second discussion, however, Quintilian advances a stronger skeptical position that casts doubt on the orator's ability to assess the truth or falsity of a statement in the first place. In response to the charge that rhetoricians do “not know whether what [they say] is true” (*nescit an verum sit quod dicit*, II.17.38), Quintilian rebuts that a variety of intellectual practitioners also suffer from such ignorance. He explains that if a rhetorician does not understand the truth of his statements, then “neither do the people who tell us that the origin of all things lies in fire or water or the four elements, or indeed those who calculate the distances between the stars or the size of the sun and the earth” (*Ne ii quidem qui ignem aut aquam aut quattuor elementa aut corpora insecabilia esse ex quibus res omnes initium duxerint tradunt, nec qui intervalla siderum et mensuras solis ac terrae colligunt*, II.17.38). Rather than separate oratory from other practices that use apodeictic reasoning in place of persuasive language, Quintilian applies to

all such practices the same skeptical outlook: “If reason (*ratio*) enables those practitioners to appear not just to suppose [their respective claims] but to know them because of the force of their proofs, the same reason (*eadem ratio*) may very well do as much for the orator” (*Quodsi ratio efficit ut haec non opinari sed propter vim probationem scire videantur, eadem ratio idem praestare oratori potest*, II.17.38). At best, orators, mathematicians, and philosophers merely “appear to know” (*scire videantur*) their claims, and as Quintilian himself summarizes, “in the end, the orator knows that the things he says are similar to the truth” (*scit autem esse veri similia quae dicit*, II.17.39), a measured conclusion, so he suggests, that extends to these other practitioners as well.

Scholarship has not fully explored how Quintilian's skeptical approach in the *Institutio* extends well beyond the sphere of forensic oratory. Tobias Reinhardt and Michael Winterbottom explain in their commentary on Book II of the *Institutio* how Quintilian understands, “like Socrates, [that] rhetoric knows that it does not know” (2006, 309), and many scholars have noted that “truth is no more than a high degree of plausibility” in Quintilian's rhetorical and legal thinking (Witteveen 2003, 348). This paper shows that such observations, while correct, illustrate only part of a larger skeptical program in the *Institutio*.

Bibliography

- Dominik, William J. “The Style Is the Man: Seneca, Tacitus, and Quintilian’s Canon.” In *Roman Eloquence: Rhetoric in Society and Literature*, edited by William J. Dominik, 42-57. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Reinhardt, Tobias and Michael Winterbottom, eds. *Institutio Oratoria: Book 2*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Witteveen, Willem J. “The Jurisprudence of Quintilian.” In *Quintilian and the Law: The Art of Persuasion in Law and Politics*, edited by Olga E. Tellegen-Couperus, 303-318. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2003.