CHAPTER FOURTEEN

POETRY, POLITICS, AND PLEASURE IN QUINTILIAN

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1. Introduction

The role of the aesthetic in the evaluation of literature has generated considerable controversy over the past several decades. On the one hand, many critical theorists, especially those of a Marxist persuasion, have argued that the aesthetic cannot be understood separately from the political. Terry Eagleton’s *Ideology of the Aesthetic* is a particularly well-known example of this point of view, which is, in broad outlines at least, also familiar to Latinists from Thomas Habinek’s *Politics of Latin Literature*. Critics such as these argue that aesthetic judgments, which have traditionally been represented as disinterested, in fact have a political function. For such scholars the work of criticism is, as Habinek puts it, to ‘politicize the aesthetic’, that is, to expose the coercive hierarchies that literature creates and maintains.¹ Others, however, have attempted to reclaim for the aesthetic some of its traditional autonomy and to argue that aesthetic criticism may not necessarily require collusion with unappealing ideologies.² Charles Martindale has recently taken up this cause within Classics in his neo-Kantian manifesto *Latin Poetry and the Judgement of Taste*, in which he takes exception with politicizing critics—Habinek in particular—who, he feels, argue that

¹ See Eagleton 1990, 3: ‘The construction of the modern notion of the aesthetic artefact is inseparable from the construction of the dominant ideological forms of modern class-society, and indeed from a whole new form of human subjectivity appropriate to that social order ...’; and Habinek 1998, 5–6 where he proposes ‘an unsentimentalized account of the political and social function of treasured classical texts’.

² Within the disciplines of English and Cultural Studies this debate was already underway before Habinek’s book appeared: George Levine’s introduction to Levine 1994 is a passionate discussion of the dilemma facing a scholar who loves literature but recognizes and abhors its oppressive function. While Levine advocates a rehabilitation of some form of aesthetic criticism, the essays in Berube 2005 suggest ways that the aesthetic has always been a part of political and ideological criticism.
‘the aesthetic is merely an occlusion or mystification of the political’. Martindale, who elsewhere shows himself capable of a much more nuanced approach to the relationship of politics and aesthetics, is perhaps offering this characterization of Habinck’s work as an intentionally reductive provocation; it is unlikely that very many politicizing critics would express their position in so extreme a form as that which Martindale attributes to them, least of all Habinck, who presents his book as complementary to traditional criticism. Martindale’s critique, however, seems to me nevertheless to call attention to the need to define more precisely the political function of the aesthetic, lest we appear guilty of implying, as Martindale accuses us of doing, that the aesthetic is nothing more than occluded ideology. The present chapter is intended neither as a rebuttal of Martindale nor a defense of Habinck but as an exploration of the role of aesthetic factors in the political function of poetry in ancient Rome that gives a partial answer to the problem Martindale raises and fills in some elements of Habinck’s approach. I focus on Quintilian’s approach to poetry in his *Institutio Oratoria*, which declares that poetry ‘aims exclusively at pleasure’ (*solam petit voluptatem*, Quint. *Inst.* 10.1.28), thereby making poetry an aestheticized form of speech. This pleasure has a political dimension, but, as Quintilian describes it, such pleasure does not straightforwardly contribute to the elite hegemony that critics such as Habinck say poetry establishes and maintains; in fact it has the potential to undermine this hegemony. The relationship between poetry’s aesthetic pleasure and its political function in Rome is thus not one of occlusion but one of tension and negotiation.

2. The Role of Pleasure in Poetry and Oratory

I begin my investigation into how poetry was evaluated in ancient Rome with an anecdote from Cicero’s *Brutus*, in which Cicero describes what happened when the Hellenistic poet Antimachus of Colophon was reciting one

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3 Martindale 2005, 12; Eagleton himself (1990, 4) recognized that his approach might lead to such reductive claims.

4 E.g., Martindale and Thomas 2006, 5: ‘We need to avoid privileging history over ... the present moment in which the text is experienced, received, partly aesthetically (though that moment too is always potentially subject to historicization). If we respect both elements ...’.

5 Habinck 1998, 9. Habinck himself has impeccable formalist credentials as the author of *The Colometry of Latin Prose*, and his later investigation into the embodied practices of ritualized speech in Roman culture (Habinck 2005) has much to say about the aesthetic experience of song.