1. QUINTILIAN AND THE PERCEPTION OF THE SYSTEM OF POETIC GENRES IN THE FLAVIAN AGE

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Studies on Quintilian frequently contain the affirmation that we cannot consider the survey of Greek and Latin writers found in Book 10 of the *Institutio oratoria* as a chapter of literary criticism, properly speaking: we must realise—it is said—that this is a list which was created for the specific purposes of the teaching of rhetoric. The broad correspondence of the list of Greek authors with the one that was found in *De imitatio*, by Dionysius of Halicarnassus, which had the same purpose, seems to offer unequivocal confirmation of the fact that this survey belongs to an academic tradition, in which words of advice about books to read, together with judgements and comments, correspond to the precise educational purpose of pointing out the elements in every author which could be useful for the improvement of rhetorical style. In the case of the list of Latin authors, it is recognised that, in the absence of Greek sources, it probably reflects more authentically the attitudes and judgements of Quintilian and of the culture of his time, although the purpose remains unchanged. It is admitted by some scholars that the survey also includes reading advice and judgements which go beyond the mere purpose of the development of rhetorical style, and reveal a more specifically literary interest, or broader aims of a general cultural education; however, these concessions, which are

1 It was long believed that Dionysius was the direct source of Quintilian’s survey, up to Claussen 1872–3. Since Usener 1889 argued for the independence of Quintilian from Dionysius, and the derivation of both works from a common source going back to the Alexandrian canons, a huge debate has developed, together with the question of the origin and the history of the canons. During the course of this debate, there has been a gradual recognition of a greater space for an autonomous elaboration by Quintilian: the divergences from Dionysius do not exclude the possibility that Quintilian may have made a direct use of his work, integrating it with other sources, both Greek and Roman (including above all Cicero) and with the contributions of his own experience as a Roman reader and intellectual. This is the direction above all of Peterson 1891; Cousin 1935; Tavernini 1953. All the elements to reconstruct the history of the problem, together with a rich bibliography, can be found in Nicolai 1992, 251–322 and especially 320–1. Cf. also Rutherford 1998, 40–2.
generally expressed rather grudgingly, are not sufficient to give the survey the character of a reliable testimony to the general opinion of educated people of the period, as regards the values attributed to the works of Greek and Latin literary tradition, or to the overall system of literary genres, irrespective of the specific aim of the development of a better rhetorical style.

It is undoubtedly true that this educational objective is the basic aim behind the whole discussion, and that the judgements expressed by Quintilian on the single authors are formulated mainly, though not exclusively, for this purpose. However, I do not believe that the same can be said about the choice of the authors in the list: in my opinion, the list includes, as a rule, those authors who were considered to be most prestigious in the culture of the time, and for each of them, Quintilian gives the reader his opinion about his usefulness for the creation of the rhetorical style. Otherwise, it would not be possible to explain the presence of various authors who, according to Quintilian’s explicit statements, are of no use for the orator.

This is the case with Theocritus, who is defined as admirabilis in suo genere, “admirable in his own genre”, but who is totally unrelated to the world of tribunals, and indeed, to the whole world of the city, where tribunals are situated: … sed Musa illa rustica et pastoralis non forum modo uerum ipsam etiam urbem reformidat, “but that rustic, pastoral Muse of his does not dare to venture into the forum, or even into the city” (Inst. 10.1.55). And this is also the case with Aratus, who—according to Quintilian—does not possess any movement or variety, does not give any space to the representation of emotions or characters, or to speeches, and consequently has none of the qualities

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2 Exceptions are rare: Cova 1990 (especially 31–43), a somewhat disjointed study, which contains elements that cannot always be accepted, claims quite appropriately that in this section of Quintilian’s work, there is a more general literary interest, and tries to distinguish between the judgements which are more directly conditioned by the objective of training for the orator and those which are more specifically literary criticism; within the framework of an interesting appeal to the modern movement “Law and Literature”, underlining the need to introduce a broad cultural and literary training into the preparation of workers in the field of justice, Taekema 2003 insists forcefully, though without going into details, on the various reasons for a general cultural preparation which are at the basis of Quintilian’s recommendations for reading. On the contrary, Schneider 1983, 118, attributes to Quintilian’s survey the limited function of offering examples that the student of rhetoric can imitate whenever a suitable occasion occurs.

3 The question is briefly touched upon in Cousin 1935, 572; Cova 1990, 41.