

Interpretatio and *inventio*:
the case of Servius' commentary
on Virgil's *Eclogues*¹

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Views on the relationship between rhetoric, poetics, and hermeneutics have varied greatly throughout the ages, and the precise nature of this relationship is still a topic of debate. Similarly, the relationship between the Late Antique rhetorician and the Late Antique grammarian is complex and competitive. Despite different attitudes, it is uncontroversial to claim that the three disciplines and the two professions meet in the realm of *elocutio*; they share the technical vocabulary of style, figures and tropes. In this article, I want to argue that further exploration of common ground, namely that of *inventio*, may be worthwhile. I shall begin by opening up this avenue of research with a reading of two passages from what is perhaps the most important extant example of Late Antique literary criticism in Latin – Servius' commentary on Virgil.

Grammar, rhetoric and Servius

Grammar and rhetoric were fundamental parts of the ancient educational system. The *grammaticus* held an important position between that of the *litterator* and the *rhetor*.² While the *litterator* taught the students their basic knowledge of letters and the *rhetor* taught composition and how to deliver speeches, based inter alia on literary form and structure, the *grammaticus* held the middle ground, teaching both morphology, syntax, and the reading and interpretation of authors. Though the grammarian and *rhetor* shared the technical vocabulary of styles, figures and tropes, their perspectives on these differed. While the grammarian often treated figurative language as a deviation from normal language, the rhetorician treated it as ornament.³

1 I am grateful to Øivind Andersen for having reintroduced classical rhetoric as a teaching subject in Norway. Through teaching rhetoric these last years, first as an assistant on his course and later on my own, I have not only gained insight into a vital field, but also become a much better reader of ancient texts. Though Andersen himself leaves the chapter on poetics to the nestor of modern studies of ancient rhetoric, George A. Kennedy, in his book *I Retorikkens Hage (In the Garden of Rhetoric)*, I still hope the relationship between the two is a matter of interest to him as a literary scholar and rhetorician. I would also like to thank my colleagues at the University of Oslo, Anastasia Maravela and Tor Ivar Østmoe, for valuable help along the path through what sometimes seemed more like a rhetorical wood than a rhetorical garden.

2 On grammar and its development as well as the relationship between the *litterator*, *grammaticus* and *rhetor*, see Irvine 1994.

3 See e.g. Copeland and Sluiter 2009, 28–38.

Servius is the most famous Late Antique grammarian that we know of; he is even a character in Macrobius' fictional dialogue *Saturnalia*, where he is presented in the text as standing above the *plebeia grammaticorum cohors* (1.24.8).⁴ His most famous work is his huge commentary on Virgil, which is perhaps the most important work both in the history of Virgilian criticism and in the genre of literary commentaries in the first millennium. His work has had an impressive influence, particularly since his commentary physically framed almost every Renaissance edition of Virgil.⁵

Servius' style of commentary is perhaps surprisingly recognizable to the modern reader, though the technical vocabulary might not be so easily recognizable. After an introduction, the commentary follows a lemmatic form. Like many commentaries, his interest is more in the collection of interesting details than the pedagogical placement of these within a wider landscape, though it does not necessarily follow that there is no broader purpose behind the comments. His commentary is certainly magisterial in many senses of the word, though scholars have debated whether it is more directed towards teachers than pupils.⁶ In the commentary Servius' interest in a wide range of topics is illustrated, and he often gives more information than necessary.⁷ Robert Kaster lists the following categories: comments on 'punctuation, metre, uncertain readings, myth or other *Realien* and especially on the language'; he further remarks that the comments on language dwarf the others, representing two notes for every three.⁸ However, the category 'language' must be understood broadly and should include comments on figurative language and other issues that many would categorize as literary criticism.⁹ Likewise, as in modern commentaries, the commentary is peppered with references to parallel passages. Yet there is an important difference between Servius and modern commentaries which is worthy of note. His commentary was intended for an audience who used Latin as their main academic language, and thus his comments on proper usage were of more immediate relevance than they are today.

Scholarship on Servius has, for a long time, been meagre due to the

4 His method is also visible here, though Kaster 1988, 171–2, finds significant differences between this presentation and the actual commentary.

5 Cf. Wilson-Okamura 2010, 32.

6 Kaster 1988, 170 argues that the intended audience must have been *pueri*, while Marshall 1997, 20 and Stansbury in McDonough et al. 2004 argue for teachers.

7 On commentaries and *copia*, cf. Gumbrecht 1999. For a brief description of the concept of commentaries underlying the argument of this article, see Skoie 2002, 14–19.

8 Kaster 1988, 170. For another way of describing the range of topics, see the analysis of Servius' commentary on the first ten lines of the *Aeneid* in Marshall 1997, Appendix B.

9 Cf. Sharrock 2008.

complicated transmission of the text and the lack of modern editions.¹⁰ However, this situation is starting to change, and nuanced readings of different aspects of Servius are appearing – not least as a consequence of the rise of reception studies.¹¹ However, surprisingly little has been written so far on rhetoric or, indeed, on the commentary on the *Eclogues*.¹²

Although Servius' commentary has achieved exemplary status, his was not the only way of writing commentaries in Late Antiquity, nor were grammarians the only ones who were commenting on Virgil. Servius' near contemporary, the rhetor Tiberius Claudius Donatus, comments in the preface to his *Interpretationes Virgilianae*: 'If you adequately pay attention to Virgil's poetry and suitably understand its purpose, you will find in the poet a great *rhetor* and hence understand that *orators* especially should teach Virgil, not *grammatici*'.¹³ However, as I shall attempt to show, there is much more rhetoric in Servius than such a statement would indicate – even though Servius does not regard Virgil as a *rhetor*, but as a poet.

Servius' approach to the Eclogues

The intention of the *Eclogues* is, according to Servius' preface, to imitate Theocritus and 'in some places' to allegorically thank Augustus (*Intentio poetae haec est, ut imitetur Theocritum Syracusanum ... et aliquibus locis per allegoriam agat gratias Augustuo et aliis nobilibus, quorum favore amissum agrum recepit*).¹⁴ Thus, we have two rhetorical concepts at the core of Servius' approach: *imitatio* and *allegoria*.

10 The text of Servius that we have today is a conflation of Servius and what is called 'Servius auctus' or 'Servius Danielis'. On the textual transmission, see Murgia 1968. There is still no complete modern edition of Servius, the so-called 'Harvard Servius' so far consists only of the commentary on *Aen.* 1–5. Meanwhile Cambridge has reprinted the Thilo–Hagen edition from 1887 as late as 2011, and this is the edition used for the *Eclogues* in this article. This is also the text which is used on the Perseus website.

11 The main recent works on Servius were, for a long time, Kaster 1988 and Marshall 1997. However, a new trend seems to be emerging, the most recent example of which is Casali and Stok 2008. Likewise, the translation of Servius' commentary on *Aeneid* 4 has made parts of the commentary available to a completely new audience; see McDonough et al. 2004. For studies of Servius from the point of view of reception, see especially Patterson 1987, Fowler 1992, Thomas 2001 and Kaster 2012.

12 There are of course exceptions; Patterson 1987 and Thomas 2001 deal with Servius on the *Eclogues* in general, Zetzel 1984 focuses on history and – more specifically – Calcante 2011 deals with rhetoric in the *Eclogues* (*recusatio* in *Eclogue* 6).

13 *Si Maronis carmina competenter attenderit et eorum mentem congrue comprehenderit, invenies in poeta rhetorem summum atque inde intelleges Vergilium non grammaticos, sed oratores tradere debuisse.* Quoted from McDonough et al. 2004, XVIII.

14 In this article I refer only to passages from Servius, unless otherwise stated. All quotations from Servius are from the Thilo–Hagen edition, 1887/2011.

Imitatio is of course a key concept in poetics and in rhetorical pedagogy and practice. Aristotle's theory of mimesis is fundamental to the understanding of poetry in general. For the Latin poets, imitation or *aemulation* of Greek literature is essential. In rhetoric, imitation is considered by some as a separate fourth factor (in addition to nature, art, and training) in bringing the faculty of speech to perfection, and according to Quintilian imitation is an important part of the art of rhetoric.¹⁵ Servius' observation on imitation is important for his exposition of the *Eclogues*; this is evident in the intertextual references to Theocritus in the text. Allegory is, however, the rhetorical term that appears most frequently in the commentary to the *Eclogues* (15 times), and in general it is the rhetorical concept most discussed in relation to Servius.¹⁶ According to Servius, the allegorical dimension distinguishes Virgil's *Eclogues* from Theocritus' *Idylls* as it reveals more poetic complexity and is a sign of an urban or sophisticated poetics.¹⁷ In Servius' reading, allegory is primarily linked to the biographical reading of *Ecl.* 1, 2 and 9. According to Marshall, this reading 'did serious damage to subsequent readers of Virgil'.¹⁸ However, I tend to agree with Patterson, who thought that it was the critics who had been naïve.¹⁹ As stated above, Servius only reads Virgil allegorically in some places (*aliquibus locis*).²⁰ And in some places he explicitly rejects allegorization (e.g. at 1.28 and 3.20) or claims that you can read something allegorically or not (e.g. 1.27).

As a further key to Servius' general interpretation of the *Eclogues*, a third rhetorical topic is important – that of style or 'character' in Servian terminology. In his preface, Servius famously places the *Eclogues* in the lowest of the three styles, the humble style (*humilis*), while the *Aeneid* is written in the grand style (*grandiloquus*) and the *Georgics* in the medium style (*medius*). This generic label is an important premise for the further interpretation and is explicitly referred to in the later explanation of lemmata, e.g. on *Ecl.* 1.2 the *tenuis*

15 Cf. Quint. 3.5.1: *Facultas orandi consummator natura arte executione, cui partem quartam adiciunt quidam imitationis, quam nos subicimus.* ('The faculty of speech is brought to perfection by Nature, Art and Practice, some add a fourth factor, Imitation, but I include this under Art.' Trans. Russell, 2001).

16 Cf. e.g. Jones 1961 on Servius in general and Levis (1993) on Servius' *Eclogues*.

17 *Hoc autem fit poetica urbanitate* ('But his makes for a poetic urbanity', *prooem.*).

18 Marshall 1997, 22.

19 Patterson 1987, 35.

20 Even when it comes to a single character in the *Eclogues* he does not necessarily go for a consistent allegorical reading, as he famously comments on *Ecl.* 1.1: *... hoc loco Tityri sub persona Vergilium debemus accipere; non tamen ubique, sed tantum hoc exigit ratio.* ('Here we ought to read Virgil behind the character of Tityrus, though not always – only where this makes sense.')

avena is explained as a choice of instrument precisely because this should be understood within the framework of the humble style.²¹

On the level of figurative language, the rhetorical technical vocabulary is – not unsurprisingly – frequent. As is the case for most commentators at this time, Servius’ technical terms are those of Herennius and Quintilian. In several places he notes how expressions are simply figurative speech (*figurata ait*), without specifying the type of figure. Kaster notes how this phrase is often framed by the pedagogical *non debuit* (‘should not’) or *debuit enim dicere* (‘should have said’), but I do not find that this is the case to the same extent in the commentary on the *Eclogues*.²² Of the 12 instances of the phrase, none are framed by *non debuit* or its cognates, though some are paraphrased in ‘normal’ language. Kaster’s examples are all from the *Aeneid*. This might signify an interest in pointing out precisely the figurative quality rather than the ‘unorthodox’ usage, when it comes to the *Eclogues*. I would therefore like to suggest that this might be Servius’ way of underscoring his differentiation of the *Eclogues* and Theocritus’ *Idylls* and of supporting the idea of the *Eclogues* as poetically more complex and sophisticated.

The parallels listed might also indicate a rhetorical disposition. Cicero is mentioned about 20 times, and seven of these are references to his speeches. Of course mythology, history and colourful – perhaps even humorous remarks on everyday issues also fill up the commentary. *Eclogue* 6 in particular provides an opportunity to delve into mythology. In his lemma on the child in *Eclogue* 4.21, on the other hand, Servius exhibits a less learned tenor. He comments on the appropriateness of the baby being given milk: ‘after all, what is more apt for a child?’²³ On this occasion, however, I want to highlight the rhetorical tenor and Servius’ idea of Virgilian complexity in his general approach to the *Eclogues*.

21 In the explanation of the first lemma on *Ecl.* 3 he refers to another triad of *characteres*, this time *characteres dicendi* based on the type of narration in the tradition from Aristotle’s *Poetics*: *novimus tres characteres dicendi: unum in quo poeta loquitur ... alium dramaticum, in quo nusquam poeta loquitur ... tertium mixtum* (‘we know of three genres of narration, one in which the poet speaks ..., another dramatic where the poet never speaks ... and a third mixed’) and he places *Ecl.* 3 in the dramatic genre. He also uses more specific literary generic terminology when he labels *Ecl.* 4 a *genethliacon*.

22 Kaster 1988, 177 ff.

23 The writing on trees in *Ecl.* 5.13, today often considered an important metapoetic event, is similarly described as apt due to the rustic character of the speakers – *ubi enim debuit magis rusticus scribere?* (‘where else should a rustic write?’).

Inventio: two examples

So far I have shown that rhetorical theory is crucial to Servius' discussion of intention (imitation and allegory) and to his explanation of issues of language as understood in a broad sense (levels of style and figurative language). The basic canon of rhetoric present is, so far, that of *elocutio*. An exception to this is imitation, which in the rhetorical system is referred to most often as a pedagogical method and in poetics as a founding principle. Following on from the latter, imitation might also be regarded as part of *inventio*, as a generator of discourse. However, it may be fruitful to also look for traces of *inventio* in a more traditional sense, as I would like to argue in the following.

Inventio is most often defined as the technique of finding ideas and arguments to be used in a speech. In terms of modes of persuasion, this is primarily related to the realm of *logos* – proofs based on reasoning, analysis and argument. Stasis theory and topics fall under this heading. I will now focus on two instances in Servius where his analysis refers to issues that fall under this umbrella.

My first example is from Servius' commentary on *Ecl.* 1. This is the famous dialogue between the herdsmen Tityrus and Meliboeus. While Tityrus has been able to keep his land and now enjoys life in a leisurely state (*otium*) Meliboeus is driven away, and their different situations make up the topic of their conversation. Tityrus comments that a god gave him his *otium*. When Meliboeus questions Tityrus about who this god is, Tityrus answers in a rather roundabout way, starting with the city of Rome which he describes as follows (19–25):

Urbem quam dicunt Romam, Meliboee, putavi	
stultus ego huic nostrae similem, quo saepe solemus	20
pastores ovium teneros depellere fetus.	
sic canibus catulos similes, sic matribus haedos	
noram, sic parvis componere magna solebam.	
verum haec tantum alias inter caput extulit urbes	
quantum lenta solent inter viburna cupressi.	25

The city men call Rome I reckoned, Meliboeus,
Fool that I was, like this of ours, to which we shepherds
Are often wont to drive the weanlings of the ewes.
So puppies are like dogs, I knew, so kids are like
Their mother goats, so I'd compare big things to small.
But she has raised her head among the other cities
High as a cypress-tree above the guelder-rose.²⁴

²⁴ Text and translation Lee 1984.

Servius reads the poem in the context of the land confiscations and he reads Tityrus as Virgil in some, but not all instances, of this poem. In his comments on this passage he addresses the question of why Tityrus answers Meliboeus' question of who this god is with a description of Rome (19). He explains this either as a sign of the rustic simplicity of Tityrus, since 'he does not possess the perfect order of narration but addresses questions by long detours' (*ordinem narrationis plenum non teneat, sed per longas ambages ad interrogata descendat*), or because in order to describe a person you need to locate him in a place. In any case, according to Servius, we are dealing with a very long hyperbaton, *urbem quam dicunt Romam. hic illum vidi Meliboeae*. Very long, indeed, since the last part, *hic illum vidi, Meliboeae* does not come before verse 42! Yet what I want to focus on here is how Servius deals with the comparisons in vv.22–4:

[22] SIC CANIBUS CATULOS SIMILES SIC MATRIBUS HAEDOS N. S. P. C. M. S. vult urbem Romam non tantum magnitudine, sed etiam genere differre a ceteris civitatibus et esse velut quendam alterum mundum aut quoddam caelum, in qua deum Caesarem vidit. qui enim comparat cani catulum vel haedum capellae, magnitudinis facit, non generis differentiam; qui autem dicit, leo maior est cane, et generis facit et magnitudinis differentiam, sicut nunc de urbe Roma fecit. putabam, inquit, ante, ita Romam comparandam esse aliis civitatibus, ut solet haedus caprae comparari; nam quamvis maior esset, tamen eam civitatem esse ducebam: nunc vero probavi eam etiam genere distare; nam est sedes deorum. hoc autem eum dicere, ille comprobatur versus 'quantum lenta solent inter viburna cupressi': nam viburnum brevissimum est, cupressus vero arbor est maxima. hoc autem genus argumentationis et apud Aristotelem lectum est, et apud Ciceronem. COMPONERE comparare.

[22] SIC CANIBUS CATULOS SIMILES SIC MATRIBUS HAEDOS N.S.P.N. he means that the city of Rome differs from other cities not only in size, but also in kind and that it is like some other world or heaven in which he saw Caesar as god. For he who compares puppies to dogs or kids to mother goats is differentiating in size, but not kind. However, he who claims that a lion is bigger than a dog makes a difference both in kind and size as he now has done with Rome. I thought before, he says, that Rome could be compared to other cities in the same way as it is usual to compare a kid with a mother goat; for although it is bigger, I still thought it a city, but now I have seen for myself that it is also different in kind; for it is the seat of gods. That this is what he says is proven by this verse '*lenta solent inter viburna cupressi*', because a guelder-rose is very small while a cypress is a very tall tree. This is a type of argument found both in Aristotle and Cicero. COMPONERE compare.

These comparisons are not given any space in the most recent commentaries on the *Eclogues*, but here they are given much more space.²⁵ The fact that they are comparisons is highlighted by Servius in both the long paraphrase

²⁵ By recent commentaries, I refer to Coleman 1977 in the Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics series (reprinted many times since then, most recently in 2003) and Clausen 1994.

and in the extra example. The essence, according to Servius' paraphrase, is that Tityrus realizes that Rome cannot be compared to other cities, because it is a kind of heaven, a home for gods. While the first comparisons are of size, the final comparison is a comparison of a hedge-shrub to a tree, and thus is of both size and kind (a similar comparison would be that of a lion and dog). His comment is rounded off with a reference to Cicero and Aristotle.

Comparison is the final topic in Cicero's *Topica* (68–71). Here he treats comparisons of the following categories: quantity, quality, value, and relation to things.²⁶ As I read Servius, his explanation of this passage follows Cicero's reasoning, especially that of quantity, though Cicero does not deal specifically with the issue of kind (*genus*). My point here, however, is not necessarily to prove a direct use of this Ciceronean passage, but only to point out the fact that Servius deals with topics at some length in his explanation of this poetic text, and given the amount of space he devotes to this passage, he obviously finds this important. This is moving far beyond the level of *elocutio* and into the realm of invention.

In his explanation of *Ecl.* 8, the issue is not comparison, but what Servius calls a 'syllogism'. This eclogue consists of the two songs by the shepherds Damon and Alpheisiboeus, introduced by a narrator who also dedicates the poem to an unnamed patron, probably Pollio. The shepherds' songs are both about love, the first includes ideas borrowed from Theocritus' *Id.* 3, while the latter is more closely modelled on Theocritus' *Id.* 2.1–62. Both songs are divided into stanzas with refrains. Damon sings about his love for Nysa, who is now to marry Mopsus. The seventh stanza of Damon's song deals with pitiless Love (47–50):

Saeuus Amor docuit natorum sanguine matrem
 commaculare manus; crudelis tu quoque, mater:
 crudelis mater magis, an puer improbus ille?
 Improbus ille puer; crudelis tu quoque, mater.

Pitiless Love once taught a mother to pollute
 Her hands with blood of sons; you too were cruel, mother.
 Who was more cruel, the mother or that wicked boy?
 That wicked boy was; yet you too were cruel, mother.²⁷

²⁶ *numerus, species, vis, quaedam etiam ad res aliquas affectio*, Cic. *Top.* 68.

²⁷ Text and translation in Lee 1984.

These lines, and in particular the final two, have puzzled commentators, primarily because of the triple repetition of *mater* and *crudelis*. Related to this is also the question of whether *mater* refers to the same person throughout the passage. This has troubled scholars to such an extent that textual corruption and suggested emendations.²⁸ Servius, however, defends the text and explains the passage rather extensively:

[47] SAEVUS AMOR DOCVIT quasi novam artem insinuavit et infudit. et bene fabulam omnibus notam per transitum tetigit: quis enim ignorat Medeam, ab Iasone contemptam, suos filios interemisse? utitur autem optima moderatione: nam nec totum Amori imputat, ne defendat parricidam, nec totum matri, ne Amo- rem eximat culpa; sed et illam quae paruit, et illum qui coegit, incusat.

[50] IMPROBUS ILLE PUER C. T. Q. M. non est superflua haec verborum iteratio: nam syllogismus est plenus, qui constat ex propositione, assumptione, conclusione.

[47] SAEVUS AMOR DOCVIT: As if he introduced and presented a new art. And he successfully alludes indirectly to a well-known story: for who does not know that Medea, scorned by Jason, killed her children? However, he uses an excellent moderation of this: for he neither ascribes all to Amor defending the killer of her own; nor does he ascribe all to the mother exempting Amor of guilt; but he accuses both her who obeyed and him who forced.

[50] IMPROBUS ILLE PUER C.T.Q.M. the repetition of words is not superfluous: for this is a full syllogism which consists of proposition, minor proposition and conclusion.

Servius assumes that *mater* refers to Medea throughout the passage, though Servius auctus here adds to his text that others also read *mater* as Venus (*alii hoc loco cum Amore matrem Venerem culpari volunt*). The final sentence in his lemma on 47 is a neatly and symmetrically balanced explication of the distribution of guilt between the two (*nec ... ne ...; nec ... ne ...*); and far from doubting any corruption, Servius calls this an ‘excellent moderation’ (*utitur autem optima moderatione*) of a well-known story.²⁹

In his comment on 50, Servius explicitly addresses the issue of repetition and argues that this is due to the fact that this is a syllogism. The term *syllogismus* in Latin is a rare term, but it is used to refer to a form of deductive reasoning in which a conclusion is drawn from two premises in tune with

²⁸ For an overview of the situation, see Coleman 1977 and Clausen 1994 *ad loc.* Coleman clearly argues for textual corruption.

²⁹ This is perhaps also an indication that Servius has understood the Callimachean nature of the use of mythology in the *Eclogues*, see Clausen 1994 *ad loc.*

Aristotelian logic.³⁰ Servius even goes on to make it clear that this is a perfect (*plenus*) syllogism which consists of three parts and is named according to the terminology used in Quintilian (5.14.5). Yet it might not be so clear to all his readers whether all the premises are explicitly there or whether we are dealing with an *enthymema* where the major premise is supposed. A possible syllogism could go like this:

P1: It is cruel to teach someone to commit parricide and it is cruel to perform parricide.

P2: Amor taught Medea to commit parricide and Medea committed parricide.

C: Amor and Medea are both cruel.

My point here is not necessarily to be convinced by Servius' interpretation or to figure out the exact nature of his idea of a syllogism or this syllogism, but rather to point out how he uses elements from the logical toolkit in his interpretation and exposition of this poem, and thus he moves far beyond the realm of *elocutio*.

In a similar way, Servius refers to logic in his explication of *Ecl.* 8.69. In this passage the other singer, Alpheisiboeus, refers to another mythological woman, this time to Circe. Since one might argue that the allusion to Medea is a rather dramatic comparison for Damon's beloved Nysa, one could claim that Circe's spells to get Daphnis home might be a bit over the top. Acknowledging this, Servius explains the allusion as an *argumentum a maiore ad minus* ('an argument from bigger to smaller'). In modern logic this is known as an argument *a fortiori*, and it may be traced back to Aristotle's topics (*Rh.* II 23, 1397b 12–19) and can be found in Cicero (*Top.* 23).

Further down the garden path?

In the chapter on poetics in Øivind Andersen's book *I Retorikkens Hage* ('In the Garden of Rhetoric'), George Kennedy remarks that in Late Antiquity poetics was simply looked upon as a kind of rhetoric. My brief discussion of Servius' commentary on the *Eclogues* clearly supports this claim. However, as I have tried to show, any further exploration of exactly how embedded his literary criticism is in the rhetorical tradition should not only focus on the acknowledged common ground of *elocutio*, but should also pursue the area of *inventio*. To stay within the metaphor of the title of Andersen's book, I hope this might be seen as an invitation to go further down precisely that garden path.

³⁰ *Syllogismus* is a post-Augustan term, e.g. used in Quint. 1.10.38 and 5.14.1. Cicero uses *ratiocinatio* for deductive reasoning in general, cf. *Inv. rhet.* 1.57.

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