

# INTERSECTIONS OF WIT AND RHETORIC: HUMOR AS A RHETORICAL ENTERPRISE

STEVE SHERWOOD  
TEXAS CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

A well-known scholar of classical rhetoric often begins his graduate seminars with a bit of self-deprecatory humor, telling his students that his wife insists he must leave his rhetoric books home during their family vacations. “But I usually manage to smuggle a couple of volumes under the passenger seat of the car,” he says. The students, nervous about starting a daunting graduate course, usually laugh. The witticism serves a number of purposes at the start of the seminar: it puts students at ease by drawing a self-portrait of the professor as an ordinary human being, it assures students they will on occasion have fun in the class, and it serves as an *ethos*-builder for the professor. After all, the story reveals his love for and dedication to the profession, indicating that reading about the history of rhetoric is for him not simply work but also play. As he often tells his students, if they are to thrive in the profession, studying rhetoric must become something they prefer to do above all other pursuits. Among its other purposes, then, the anecdote about smuggling rhetoric books to read on vacation reinforces this important lesson.

The use of humor as an instrument of rhetoric and pedagogy by a scholar of classical rhetoric should surprise no one. Although frowned upon by Plato, whose literary persona Socrates objects when Polus refutes a point by trying “to laugh it down, instead of disproving it” (*Gorgias* 1914, 473e), humor has a long history as a rhetorical device (and Plato himself used it to good effect). The earliest known statement about the utility of wit comes from *Gorgias* of Leontini, whom Aristotle credits with saying “the orator should defeat his opponents’ seriousness with laughter, and their laughter with seriousness” (Grant 1924, 18). Somewhat more recent thinkers, including John Locke and John Quincey Adams, however, echo Plato’s ostensible disenchantment with humor, contending that wit plays no significant role in “serious” discourse. Adams portrays humor as “always a formidable, but not always a fair antagonist” (1810, 56). Although Locke acknowl-

edges that wit may serve a purpose in speeches “where we seek rather Pleasure and Delight than Information and Improvement,” he argues that rhetorical figures and techniques, including wit, aimed at anything other than clarity and communication of important concepts are a “perfect cheat,” which rhetors use to “insinuate wrong Ideas, move the Passions, and thereby mislead the Judgment” (1975, III. x. 508). At best, Locke implies, wit is a mere ornament; at worst, it is an immoral instrument of deception.

As this essay will argue, humor is far more than an ornament aimed at misleading an audience’s judgment. Indeed, humor and rhetoric have a number of deep and intimate connections because humor is not simply a rhetorical device but also a rhetorical enterprise, subject to and illuminated by the principles of classical rhetoric—such as *kairos*, *enthymeme*, *dissoi logoi*, and *stasis topoi*, *plain style*, *sermo*, and *urbanitas*—that helped guide the orations of classical rhetoricians. Like rhetoric, humor is a persuasive art form. After all, one cannot force an audience to laugh; one must win an audience’s laughter through persuasion.

Among the many qualities that make humor a significant rhetorical art form is its ability, on occasion, to provide the most humane and appropriate response to a particular rhetorical circumstance—a response that can win agreement without rancor or violence. The sort of wit that serves as an effective tool of persuasion is not prefabricated but grows out of the particular rhetorical situation. The needs and moods of members of the audience—their tolerance of humor and their willingness to participate in it—will often determine its effectiveness.

Any study of the rhetorical nature and uses of humor and wit would do well to begin with a look at key terms and concepts. There is no universal agreement, for instance, even on the meaning of the terms *humor* and *wit*. In contemporary usage, *humor* has become a catchall term that encompasses actions, speech, and representations that people find amusing or laughable—ranging from slapstick

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Steve Sherwood directs the William L. Adams Center for Writing at Texas Christian University, where he has taught writing and literature courses since 1988. His essays have appeared in *The Clearing House*, *The Writing Center Journal*, *Journal of Teaching Writing*, *Dialogue: A Journal for Writing Specialists*, *English in Texas*, *CCTE Studies*, and other journals. His publications also include three books: the *St. Martin’s Sourcebook for Writing Tutors 4e* (2011, with Christina Murphy), *Writing Centers: An Annotated Bibliography* (1996, with Murphy and Joe Law), and the mystery novel *Hardwater* (2005, Texas Review Press).

to the most cerebral of satires. By contrast, *wit* has come to stand primarily for the sort of sophisticated verbal jest that reveals a humorist's cleverness and intelligence.

For the purposes of this essay, references to *humor* generally indicate something closer to *wit*. After all, rhetorical uses of humor will most often involve speech or text—and therefore involve verbal rather than physical jesting. And such witticisms will more often than not have purposes that go beyond mere entertainment. One of the most useful distinctions between simple humor and sophisticated wit comes from the Greek and Roman rhetors—including Plato, Aristotle and Cicero—who differentiate, based on notions of propriety,<sup>1</sup> between the clownish, clumsy, ill-timed jokes of the buffoon and the tasteful, well-timed, and clever witticisms of the cultured orator (Grant 1924, 9-11). Such an orator uses wit sparingly, makes jokes that “seem to spring from the character” (Aristotle 1926, IV viii, 3) and has the judgment to “regulate [his or her] wit” (IV viii, 10). By contrast, buffoons “itch to have their joke at all costs, and are more concerned to raise a laugh than to keep within the bounds of decorum” (IV viii, 11). The notion of appropriateness, or *to prepon*, therefore plays a key role in the rhetorical effectiveness of humor.

A number of other terms are also useful in a discussion of the persuasive uses of wit. Chief among them, of course, are *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*, which represent rhetorical appeals to character, emotion, and rationality. A number of classical rhetoricians, including Aristotle and Cicero, agree that a rhetor's use of humor can affect, positively or negatively, an audience's perception of his or her character, or *ethos*. They likewise agree that appealing to *pathos* by stimulating emotions, including amusement, in an audience can be of benefit to a rhetor. Although these rhetoricians do not speak directly to the point of using humor or wit to make an appeal to *logos*, they imply links between wit and *logos*—if only because witticisms often reveal an opponent's irrationality.

Other important terms to examine include *kairos*, *enthymeme*, *dissoi logoi*, *stasis*, *topoi*, *plain style*, *sermo*, and *urbanitas*. These terms are familiar to students of classical rhetoric but may strike many others as unfamiliar and unnecessarily technical. However, they and the concepts they represent are nevertheless pertinent both to an understanding of classical rhetoric and to an understanding of wit as a rhetorical enterprise. Of these terms, perhaps the two most central to the rhetorical uses of wit are *kairos* and *enthymeme*.

## Kairos

Wit is opportunistic and its impact hinges on timing and circumstance. For this reason, what is amusing—and persuasive—in one rhetorical situation will often not amuse or persuade in another. The impact of a jest or witticism will depend on timing, the surrounding circumstances, and the audience to whom a rhetor delivers it—in short, it will depend on *kairos*. A governing principle of sophistic discourse, *kairos* has several definitions, including the following: “fitness for the occasion” (Bizzell and Herzberg

1990, 44), “situational context” (Carter 1988, 98), and “opportune moment, right time, opportunity” (Poulakos 1995, 57). Historians of classical rhetoric describe *kairos* as encompassing both the context out of which a rhetorical need develops and the rhetor's act of inventing a response to this need. As John Poulakos says, “Springing from one's sense of timing and the will to invent, *kairos* alludes to the realization that speech exists in time and is uttered both as a spontaneous formulation of and a barely constituted response to a new situation unfolding in the immediate present” (1995, 61). Poulakos also links this sense of timeliness to a sense of appropriateness by citing George Kennedy, who says of *kairos* and *to prepon*: “The two together constitute what may be called the artistic elements in rhetorical theory as opposed to the prescribed rules” (qtd in “Toward” 1999, 29). Since each rhetorical situation unfolds in a unique, unpredictable way, an inflexible, prefabricated response will not serve. A sense of *kairos*, along with a sense of appropriateness, helps a rhetor understand the social context surrounding the act of speaking or writing and provides clues as to how to proceed. As Poulakos says,

The rhetor who operates mainly with the awareness of *kairos* responds spontaneously to the fleeting situation at hand, speaks on the spur of the moment, and addresses each occasion in its particularity, its singularity, its uniqueness. In this sense (s)he is both a hunter and a maker of unique opportunities, always ready to address improvisationally and confer meaning on new and emerging situations. (1995, 61)

Some of these new and emerging situations will call for a humorous or witty response. A given situation will also determine the type of wit an audience finds appropriate. As in other rhetorical situations, then, *kairos* serves as a guiding principle for the appropriate use of wit. Although he does not refer directly to *kairos*, Chris Holcomb describes the same phenomenon when he writes about “jesting situations” described by the authors of early modern rhetorical manuals. As he says, the manuals “recognize that the success of the speaker depends on his ability to observe decorum and adapt his jesting to the particular occasion as well as to the larger social context, even if that means refraining from jesting altogether” (2001, 28). Thomas Farrell, too, makes clear that an attention to *kairos* is crucial for the rhetor who would have an audience not simply laugh at a witticism but also understand the serious purpose behind it. Farrell says,

The fact remains that eloquence in conversation is realized in the mastery of the moment—what the Greeks called *kairos*. In rhetoric, which often begins with the urgency of the moment, eloquence moves beyond wit to the virtue of propriety—what the Greeks called *phronesis*. (1993, 236)

Although Plato does not discuss *kairos* in his works, Bizzell and Herzberg have pointed out that he unveils his version of this concept in the *Phaedrus* while putting forth his notion of tailoring speech to fit men's souls (1990, 59). As Socrates says, a wise speaker seeks

an understanding of the nature of the soul... , discovering the form which fits each nature, and so arranges and orders his speech, offering a complex soul complex speeches containing all the modes, and simple speeches to a simple soul—not before then will he be capable of pursuing the making of speeches as a whole in a scientific way, to the degree that its nature allows, whether for the purposes of teaching or persuading. (1986, 277B-C)

Plato's approach would perhaps work best in dialectic—where a speaker converses with a particular individual and can adapt his or her discourse to suit this individual's particular needs. Rhetors addressing larger audiences will, obviously, be unable to understand the soul of each member of an audience. Thus, while Plato's advice to Phaedrus may not apply to all situations, it can serve many as a way of judging the appropriate words with which to instruct or persuade a particular audience. And this advice applies to the use of humor or wit just as it does to the use of serious discourse. For example, in *De Oratore*, Cicero cites a jest that failed because of the rhetor's inattention to circumstance and audience. As Cicero tells it,

A very small witness once came forward. "May I examine him?" said Philippus. The president of the Court, who was in a hurry, answered, "Only if you are short." "You will not complain," returned Philippus, "for I shall be just as short as that man is." Quite comical; but there on the tribunal sat Lucius Aurifex, and he was even tinier than the witness: all the laughter was directed against Lucius, and the joke seemed merely buffoonish. (1942, II lix, 245)

Jests told without regard for the proper occasion and audience, then, may strike unintended targets and have unintended effects—in this case embarrassing a judge, whose opinion will affect the outcome of the case, and making the rhetor himself look foolish. Although not foolproof, a sensitivity to *kairos* can help one determine whether to use or avoid using humor while addressing a particular audience.

## Enthymeme

After *kairos*, perhaps the most important term in a discussion of humor as a rhetorical art form is *enthymeme*. Also known as the rhetorical syllogism, the enthymeme is Aristotle's primary focus in the *Art of Rhetoric*, and his discussion of logical and emotional appeals pertains to their use within the enthymeme. Therefore, one must understand the purpose and mechanism of the enthymeme before one can understand how humor functions within its framework. Gaining this understanding is not easy, though, because, as Lloyd Bitzer has said, Aristotle provides "no unambiguous statement defining the enthymeme" (1968, 179). As Aristotle indicates in the opening chapter of the *Art of Rhetoric*, a rhetor uses the enthymeme as a demonstration of proofs—appeals to logic, character, and emotion—aimed at leading an audience to probable knowledge. An important trait of the enthymeme is its

ability to persuade listeners without the rhetor's having to present all the premises of an argument. As Aristotle says, "if any one of these [premises] is well known, there is no need to mention it, for the hearer can add it himself" (1926, I ii,13). As some scholars have suggested, much of the persuasive power of the enthymeme relies on this missing premise since it invites the audience to actively participate in completing the argument, thus helping the rhetor to construct probable knowledge and, in the process, becoming a stakeholder in the argument.

By using an enthymeme, Bitzer says, a speaker "does not *lay down* his premises but lets his audience supply them out of its stock of opinion and knowledge... . The successful building of arguments depends on cooperative interaction between the practitioner and his hearers" (1968, 187, emphasis in original). The ability to supply the missing premise hinges on the audience's possession of cultural knowledge. For example, most people would accept the premise that "self-control is good, for lack of self-control is harmful" (Aristotle 1926, II xxiii, 1); therefore, a demonstration of self-control on a rhetor's part and of a lack of self-control on an opponent's part will invite the audience's arrival at the missing premise: that the rhetor is a person of good character and his or her opponent a person of poor character. In essence, then, guided by the rhetor, the audience applies common laws, beliefs, or knowledge about proper and improper behavior to infer the missing premise and arrive at a judgment. Through this act of collaboration between speaker and audience, "enthymemes intimately unite speaker and audience and provide the strongest possible proofs... . Owing to the skill of the speaker, *the audience itself helps construct the proofs by which it is persuaded*" (Bitzer 1968, 188, emphasis in original). Facilitating this collaborative effort is, Bitzer adds, the enthymeme's "essential character" (189).

In *Rhetoric and Poetics in Antiquity*, Jeffrey Walker reveals that the enthymeme is not the exclusive invention of Aristotle but a stylistic device described by pre-Aristotelian rhetoricians. One version of the enthymeme, described by Isocrates, depends on an element of surprise and has intimate links to *kairos*. As Walker says, "Isocrates' enthymematic turn... is meant to strike its audience as a brilliant, inspirational, impressive, and persuasive stroke of insight, a decisive stance-projection that brings suddenly into focus and gives memorable presence to a specific line of inference and attitude made possible by *kairos*... ." (2000, 179). When the skilled rhetor uses all of his or her artistic and stylistic abilities to construct an impressive, unexpected, and memorable enthymeme, Walker says, this construction becomes "the rhetorical move par excellence for guiding an audience's inference-making and attitude formation in a particular direction" (180).

The enthymeme can also be the rhetorical move *par excellence* for a rhetor guiding an audience to laughter. In much the same way as an argument, a piece of humor is enthymematic—in the Aristotelian meaning of the term—because it remains incomplete until an audience supplies an unstated or missing premise. Consider, for example,

Oscar Wilde's famous maxim: "Work is the curse of the drinking classes" (Pearson 1946, 170). To find this statement humorous, one must bring to the situation a certain amount of cultural knowledge—first, in order to recognize the statement as a reversal of the standard maxim of "Drink is the curse of the working classes" and, second, to see this reversal as perversely logical and appropriate to the person uttering the statement. If one is ignorant of the standard maxim, one has no basis for perceiving the cleverness of the reversal and may take the statement seriously. Those who supply the missing premise, though, participate in the construction of the witticism, share in the laughter, and become stakeholders in the idea.

A jest is also enthymematic in the sense that it combines appeals to *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos* in an attempt to win a judgment—in this case, the judgment that the jest is funny. This appeal to *logos* is often backhanded—by way of illogic or logical inconsistency. Because the rhetor's proposal is clearly illogical in some way, the audience engages its own sense of rationality, compares this sense to the one proposed by the rhetor, and understands that the rhetor is insane, foolish, or joking (or perhaps all three). This understanding often hinges on the audience's judgment of the character (or *ethos*) of the rhetor, based on what he or she has so far said and done. If the rhetor has demonstrated cleverness and good sense, the audience may accept the irrational proposition as a joke and detect within it a hidden rationality, such as a drinker's conception of himself as a member of a social class cursed not by alcohol, but by the need to interrupt his drinking to earn a living. If not, and the rhetor's *ethos* leaves open the possibility that he or she is a fool, the audience may assume the rhetor is seriously proposing the irrational idea—and may laugh, if at all, in derision. As Aristotle says, an audience tends to like a rhetor who uses humor cleverly and in good taste, and the result is an enhanced *ethos*.<sup>2</sup> The reverse is true of a rhetor who uses humor clumsily or in poor taste. A jest likewise makes use of appeals to *pathos*, sometimes directly, by way of ridiculing a target, but perhaps more often indirectly. In the case of Oscar Wilde's humorous maxim, one may pity the deluded drinker or secretly sympathize with his dislike of work even as one laughs at him. Or consider, for example, a self-deprecating rhetor who derides her own faulty memory. The rhetor is asking an audience to laugh at this minor fault, based on an understanding that it is human to forget, and therefore sympathetic, forgivable, and funny. This understanding, and the laughter that results, relies on the audience's ability to supply an unstated premise—perhaps in this case that the rhetor, who has so far demonstrated a reliable memory, is speaking ironically.

The Isocratic meaning of *enthymeme* applies to wit in several ways. First, the shock of surprise—or the "sudden, dramatic sense of opening prospects" (Walker 2000, 179)—on which Isocrates's enthymeme depends for maximum effect resembles the surprise on which wit often depends. After all, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* says, a witticism involves an "apt association of thought

and expression, calculated to surprise and delight by its unexpectedness,"<sup>3</sup> while enthymemes, Walker says, "will not be fully predictable, will not follow as inevitable conclusions necessitated by the 'premises' preceding them" (179) but will lead the audience to see a conclusion as unexpectedly reasonable (as is true of the Oscar Wilde quip cited above). A related application involves the use of emotions since an enthymeme "exploits a cluster of emotively resonant, value-laden representations and systems of opposition... in order to generate in its audience a passionate identification with a particular stance" (180). A witticism often exploits not simple or pure emotions but complex mixtures of emotions, rooted in societal values that combine opposites—for example, the degrees of pity and scorn one might feel for someone who makes a social blunder. And as humor theorists suggest, instances of wit and humor hinge on emotive, value-laden systems of opposition that are similar—if not identical—to those exploited by enthymemes. For example, D. H. Monro says, "What is essential in humor is the mingling of two ideas which are felt to be utterly disparate" ("Theories" 1988, 352). In an earlier work, Monro argues, "The neatness, the suddenness, the directness with which the two universes can be linked is an essential part of the joke. There must be an immediate contrast which shocks the mind" (*Argument* 1963, 65). This shock has the potential of changing perspectives and attitudes. As Monro notes, laughter brings about "the abrupt dissolution of... an attitude of mind... The mind is as it were wound up ready to proceed in a definite direction: it is suddenly wrenched off its path and turned in a different direction" (147). Citing V. K. Krishna Menon, who calls such a shift in attitudes "hopping," Monro says this shift generally occurs between points of view separated by "a direct and violent opposition" (225). And he argues that humor is both the catalyst for and the product of this attitudinal shift, which gives humor a distinct resemblance, on several levels, to the Isocratic enthymeme.

### ***Dissoi Logoi, Stasis***

Other terms from classical rhetoric that involve the blending of opposite ideas, or incongruities, and therefore share essential qualities with humor are *dissoi logoi* and *stasis*. The term *dissoi logoi* literally means "two-fold speeches" (Kennedy 1963, 34), but scholars also define it as "the notion that on every issue there are two arguments opposing each other" (Poulakos *Sophistical* 1995, 58). The *Dissoi Logoi*, an anonymous text written "at some time subsequent to the Peloponnesian War" (Sprague 1972, 279), makes the case that "Any given problem involves choice or compromise between two antitheses" (Kennedy 66). The author of the *Dissoi Logoi* lists situations that appear evil from the perspective of one time, place, and perspective and good from another. The author sums up this concept by describing a principle similar to *kairos*: "everything done at the right time is seemly and everything done at the wrong time is disgraceful" (Sprague, 283). As George Kennedy explains, a rhetor can resolve

the dilemma posed by *dissoi logoi* only by resorting to *kairos*, choosing the thesis that best fits the circumstances, and thus finding the way to “relative truth and to action” (66–67). The concept of *dissoi logoi* applies to humor not only because humor often involves a fusion of opposite objects, actions, emotions, or ideas, but also, as stated earlier, because an audience’s perception of humor will shift with the circumstances.

Stasis theory provides a “heuristic for finding the point at issue in a dispute” (Enos 1995, 50), and like *dissoi logoi* the term *stasis* shares a number of similarities with *kairos*. As Michael Carter says, although *kairos* developed during the sophistic, pre-Socratic era and *stasis* during the later Stoic era in Greece, both concepts hinge on “the role of opposing forces,” “both act as a stimulus for rhetorical action,” “both imply an initial standstill... but both provide the means to break the deadlock of the standstill through rhetorical action,” and “both are concerned with the rhetorical situation” (1988, 106). Otto Dieter focuses a significant amount of attention on *stasis* as a “transitory state” or “immobility” (1950, 217) between two conflicting forces, motions, functions, or changes. This immobility is fleeting and serves, Dieter says, as both a transition between the conflicting forces and a stimulus toward a resolution of the conflict—including the conflict at the heart of an argument (217, 220). As such, Dieter suggests, the point of stasis provides a perspective from which a rhetor can view the conflicting movements in a debate, identify what is at stake, and prepare an appropriate response to his or her opponent.

Like an argument, a witticism has a point of stasis, a stopping point on which the opposing movements or forces of the witticism hinge. To understand a jest, the audience must pause to ask what is at issue—or where the conflict, comparison, or contradiction lies. In a simple “knock, knock” joke, for example, the point of stasis often rests on a pun, a word that has at least two meanings (e.g., “Knock, knock.” “Who’s there?” “Orange.” “Orange Who?” “Orange you going to let me in?”). The hesitation one feels in determining the most appropriate meaning is the joke’s stasis. In *De Oratore*, Cicero says that a rhetor’s artful uses of ambiguous, equivocal, or antithetical language are especially clever and useful forms of wit. To illustrate ambiguity, Quintilian cites Nero’s commentary on a dishonest slave: “No one was more trusted in my house: there was nothing closed or sealed to him” (1942, VI iii, 50–51). Such a jest depends on an unexpected resolution to the conflict posed, at the point of stasis, by the ambiguity, equivocation, or antithesis. The stasis point comes between opposing interpretations of the rhetor’s sincerity—based on the issue of whether Nero means what he says literally or ironically. Audience members must judge, from tone of voice and what they know about the circumstances, that Nero knows his servant is a thief.

A potentially false compliment involves a similar dynamic, with the stasis point resting on opposing interpretations of intent. An employer who tells a worker, “Nice work!” may mean this compliment literally, may

be engaging in mild sarcasm, or may be issuing a harsh criticism. The employee who listens to this remark must hesitate long enough to compare what she knows about the job she’s done to what her boss might think, listen carefully to the tone of her boss’s voice to detect the level of sincerity, and judge how to interpret the statement. The stasis lies at the point where the boss’s suspected intent and the employee’s knowledge intersect. And most instances of wit and humor, especially those based on incongruous elements, not only hinge on a point of stasis but also require an audience to comprehend and resolve the conflict in order to “get” the joke.

### Topoi

In classical rhetoric, the *topoi* (topics) or *loci* (the Latin equivalent) represent places where a rhetor can discover arguments appropriate to a particular situation. In Aristotelian rhetoric, William Grimaldi says, “The topics are the source material for argumentation by enthymeme” (“Studies” 1998, 26). In the *Art of Rhetoric*, Aristotle himself describes the *topoi* as “a selection of premises about probabilities and what is most suitable” (1926, II xxii, 10) and as “the elements of enthymemes” (II xxii, 13). Aristotle describes twenty-eight such *topoi*, among them premises based on qualities of opposition, similarity, relation, time, definition, induction, enumeration of parts, and contradiction. Grimaldi divides the twenty-eight *topoi* into three general patterns of inference and logic: antecedent-consequent, or cause-effect; more-less; and some form of relation (“Sources” 1998, 134). He characterizes the *topoi* not as a simple, mechanical mode of rhetorical invention, as some scholars have suggested (126), but as Aristotle’s attempt to provide an intelligent, systematic way of arriving at probable knowledge (124). Indeed, Richard Enos and Janice Lauer have portrayed the *topoi* as “heuristics having the potentially dynamic characteristic of energizing thought by shaping meaning” (1998, 206). Instead of being static, obsolete devices, then, the *topoi*—via the enthymeme—could “energize ideas through the socially shared understanding of such modes of relational thought,” making them a tool for “invention through shared discourse” (206). In order to remain a dynamic instrument of shared invention, the *topoi* must be adaptable to different circumstances, purposes, and cultures—in short, they must be sensitive to the changing *kairos*. That they are indeed adaptable becomes clear from the way Hermagoras altered them to fit stasis theory—applying topics to each of the four categories of stasis—fact, definition, quality, and place (Carter 1988, 99). As Carter explains, “Under issues of fact, for instance, are *topoi* such as motive, ability, desire, and the defendant’s character. Under definition is the typical definitional *topos* of setting forth the features of a crime, such as treason, and then showing how the defendant’s actions either meet or do not meet those features” (1988, 99).

That the *topoi* are useful not simply in generating ideas for serious oratory, but also for generating audience-appropriate humor becomes evident from statements made by

Cicero and Quintilian. In *De Oratore*, for example, while discussing the sources of laughter, Cicero suggests that the same topics are useful for generating both humorous and serious oratory. As he says, rhetors should remember that “whatever subjects I may touch on as being sources of laughing-matters, may equally well, as a rule, be sources of serious thoughts” (1942, II lxi, 248). In the *Institutio Oratoria*, Quintilian, too, says that serious and humorous speeches share *loci*. He cautions,

It is, however, a difficult task to indicate the sources from which laughter may be legitimately derived or the topics where it may be naturally employed. To attempt to deal exhaustively with the subject would be an interminable task and a waste of labour. For the topics suitable to jests are no less numerous than those from which we may derive *reflexions*, as they are called, and are, moreover, identical with the latter. (1921, VI iii, 35-36)

The futility of this task does not, of course, stop Quintilian, or Cicero before him, from attempting to examine various *loci*. In fact, a large portion of *De Oratore*’s section on humor involves examining the types of humor—based on facts and language—and their various subcategories, including humor based on the unexpected, the ambiguous, plays on words, words taken literally, and antithesis. Many of these *loci* resemble those put forth by the *Tractatus Coislinianus*, a manuscript originally discovered “appended to one of the manuscripts of Aristophanes” (Grant 1924, 32), and which presents a theory of comedy based on a listing of *loci ridiculi*. The manuscript, which Lane Cooper argues has roots in the lost second book of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, cites sixteen *loci* or places from which humor arises, divided into two categories: diction and things. Among sources of humor based on diction, the tract lists homonyms, synonyms, garrulity, paronyms (words derived from the same root), diminutives, perversion of words by voice and by other means, and grammar and syntax. Among the sources of humor based on things, the tract says laughter derives from assimilation (toward the better or the worse), deception, the impossible, the possible and inconsequent, the unexpected, the debasing of personages, the use of clownish dancing, and a lack of sequence or logic (Cooper 1922, 225).

Chris Holcomb, who examines the *topoi* of jesting used by rhetors during the English Renaissance, agrees with Quintilian about the futility of attempting to make a definitive list of sources for humor. As Holcomb says, “Jests are far too idiosyncratic and far too open to a diversity of interpretations for anyone to determine, once and for all, their subject matter and function” (2001, 98). If one keeps in mind the practical limits of such a set of *topoi*, however, “this notion offers a theoretical apparatus for mapping out what a particular culture or community generally finds funny. That is, a set of jesting *topoi* might constitute common ground (*communis locus*) that allows the content and point of jests to be shared” (2001, 98). An awareness of a community’s *topoi* for humor would permit a rhetor to tailor speech or writing to appeal to

its members’ particular tastes. The fact that some things the Greeks and Romans found amusing—such as physical deformity—would no longer amuse contemporary audiences, at least those with good taste, illustrates such *topoi* vary from culture to culture. As Holcomb argues, “[O]ne would expect the *topoi* of jesting to shift not only across groups or cultures, but also across time. Patterns in the ways these *topoi* are reproduced, revised, forgotten, or replaced could serve as indices of social change” (98). The open-ended nature of the *topoi*, in fact, prevent them from becoming obsolete or formulaic, preserving their usefulness as sites of invention. After all, as Cicero and Quintilian suggest, the *topoi* serve as a tool of invention for both serious and humorous speeches since serious thoughts can derive from humorous matters and vice versa. Thus, one can use the *topoi* to approach serious ideas with a lighter touch. At the same time, one’s knowledge of the culture’s *topoi* can also help one tailor one’s words to suit the sense of humor of one’s audience.

### Plain Style, Sermo, Urbanitas

The terms *plain style*, *sermo*, and *urbanitas* come out of Stoic rhetorical theory and describe concepts related to an urbane, informal, witty style of speech rooted in Socratic irony and preferred by Cicero and the Scipionic Circle—a group of writers and orators who influenced Cicero’s thinking. The goals of a rhetor speaking or writing in the plain style were, first, “to speak the truth” and, second, “to teach” (Fiske 1971, 78). In the service of these goals, but without “any self-conscious straining at emotional effects” (79), the rhetor could use wit appropriate to the circumstances. The five virtues of the plain style, George Converse Fiske says, are correctness, brevity, clarity, appropriateness, and embellishment that avoids vulgarity (1971, 127-30). As it developed in Rome—fostered by Scipio and Panaetius, Cicero’s friends and colleagues—the plain style took form in the *sermo*, which in Latin means “conversation” (84). The *sermo*, in contrast to oratory, was the form of speech most appropriate to settings other than the formal venues of the courts, assemblies, and senate. As Cicero says, “Conversation should find its natural place in social gatherings, in informal discussions, and in intercourse with friends; it should also seek admission at dinners” (*De Officiis* 1913, I xxxvi, 132). Cicero enumerates the essential qualities of the *sermo* as follows:

It should be easy and not in the least dogmatic; it should have the spice of wit. And the one who engages in conversation should not debar others from participating in it, as if he were entering upon a private monopoly; but, as in other things, so in a general conversation he should think it not unfair for each to have his turn. He should observe, first and foremost, what the subject of conversation is. If it is grave, he should treat it with seriousness; if humorous, with wit. And above all, he should be on the watch that his conversation shall not betray some defect in his character. (I xxxvii, 134)

As Fiske observes, Cicero came to see the *sermo* as “the ideal literary form for the plain style whether written or spoken” (1971, 85) and Panaetius saw “the restrained type of ironic or Socratic humor as the appropriate tone” (84) for the *sermo*.

The Roman version of Socratic irony takes form in the concept of *urbanitas*, a term that describes the qualities possessed by an *urbanus*, or a civilized and courteous rhetor, whose wit is “marked by reserve in the use of his powers and by studied understatement” (Fiske 1971, 343). As Fiske says, the term “connoted not only wit and cleverness, but also to a much greater degree elegance and refinement” (124). Aimed in large part at securing the rhetor’s *ethos*—and at facilitating a friendly reception of his or her ideas—the wit of the *urbanus* “has the qualities of the liberal jest” (Grant 1924, 121), which include sensitivity to appropriateness in time and subject matter, and lacks “the malice and the obscenity of the illiberal jest” (119). Cicero describes this type of humor as *gravitate salsum*, translated as a type of “humour... blended with austerity” (*De Oratore* 1942, II lxvi, 270) or *severe ludus*, translated as “solemnly jesting” (II lxvi, 269). Both phrases refer to a type of wit whose aims include communicating serious points while amusing an audience, and Cicero points to the Socratic philosophers as the “best models” of this type of wit (*De Officiis* I, xxxvii, 134).

The plain style, *sermo*, and *urbanitas* represent a style of speech suited not only to Socratic dialogue but also to other oratorical situations, including teaching. This suitability is clear from the plain style’s primary goals of “to speak the truth” and “to teach.” The qualities of the *sermo*—especially its emphasis on easy, inclusive dialogue, spiced with appropriate wit, and aimed at enhancing the rhetor’s character—also match up nicely to the type of speech conducted between a teacher and his or her students—particularly the students in a contemporary classroom, where one of the aims is to encourage students to learn by participating in group invention, discussion, and criticism. Finally, the refined, solemn jesting of the *urbanitas* is, as Cicero has said, “an elegant kind of humor... adapted to oratory as well as to polite conversation” and suitable not simply to the law courts, but “any other kind of discourse” (Watson, 162–63), including that of the home, the classroom, the office, or other social situations.

As this essay has attempted to demonstrate, although scholars have tended to frown on humor because of its association with frivolity and fun—not to mention the unfair edge it offers the witty rhetor engaged a serious argument—humor is a rhetorical enterprise governed and informed by many of the classical rhetorical principles that govern and inform other persuasive discourse. Such rhetorical concepts as *kairos*, *enthymeme*, *stasis*, *topoi*, *plain style*, *sermo*, and *urbanitas* not only offer insights into rhetorical theory that are of use to orators, but can also give insights into the effective use of wit as a rhetorical device. These concepts offer a theoretical framework with which to analyze and understand otherwise elusive phenomena—wit and humor—with an eye toward applying

them to the rhetorical situations that arise in one’s everyday life. In plainer words, students of rhetoric ought to take humor seriously.

## END NOTES

1. The humor of the cultured orator tends to be self-deprecating, tasteful, well-timed, and appropriate to the situation, the audience, and the orator’s character. Such wit enhances rather than detracts from an orator’s argument.
2. Aristotle alludes to his own discussion of the different forms of humor in the *Poetics* and touches on the rules of propriety as they relate to humor, saying that some types of humor are “becoming a gentlemen, others not. You should therefore choose the kind that suits you” (1926, III xviii, 7). Aristotle goes on to reveal his preference for irony over buffoonery—or clownish humor—because irony “is employed on one’s own account” and buffoonery “on that of another” (III xviii, 7).
3. Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “wit.”

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