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A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Decorum: Quintilian's Reflections on Rhetorical Humor

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Abstract

This study examines ancient Roman ideas about humor's boundaries in public culture. In particular, I analyze Book 6, Chapter 3 of the *Institutio Oratoria*, which covers Quintilian's reflections on the subject. Following Cicero, Quintilian engages the tensions between humor and decorum in his political context, using *urbanitas* to refine the former and to loosen the latter's strictures. In this process, the use of *urbanitas* implicitly points readers toward factors that can make humor rhetorical. Quintilian thus answers Cicero's question about the degree to which humor should be used and furthers inquiry into how much rhetorical humor can or should be taught.

Keywords: Humor, Decorum, Urbanitas, Rhetoric, Quintilian, Cicero

A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Decorum¹:

Quintilian's Reflections on Rhetorical Humor

“To look and laugh is to announce your position within a complex social matrix.”

—John R. Clarke (2007, 234)

Humor plays a prominent role in contemporary public culture. From popular television programming to the social value placed upon a “sense of humor” in friendships, the phenomenon continues to occupy a central place in human thought and action. Yet in scholarly accounts of the subject some curious tensions have emerged, raising questions about when humor should be used and what kind of boundaries should be drawn in its practice. Humor often functions to critique power, mediate culture and identity, promote tolerance over rigidity, deconstruct media problems, and broaden perspectives, expanding spaces for public debate (Christiansen and Hanson 1996; Madsen 1993; Holcomb 2001a; Bergson 1914; Achter 2008; Baym 2007; Jones and Baym 2010; Waisanen, 2011; Charland 1994; Day 2011, Hariman 2008; Smith and Voth 2002). It can create and enforce social norms, and even serve to improve one's health and social abilities (Keyton and Beck 2010; Yarwood 1995; Booth-Butterfield, Booth-Butterfield, and Wanzer 2007).

Despite this positive regard, some rhetorical educators have remained guarded about humor's uses. Many contemporary public speaking textbooks tend to eschew humor.² In one of the leading public speaking texts in the United States, a short section devoted to the subject advises students that humor is “not essential” (Lucas 1998, 450-451).³ Some guides take this advice literally, not addressing humor at all in their survey of the subject (e.g. Wood 2000; Bostrom 1988). When discussed, humor is portrayed as risky and potentially offensive, and students are cautioned to “avoid using humor” in introductory remarks (Sellnow 2005, 207). Zarefsky acknowledges humor's potential usefulness in relaxing an audience and disarming

skeptics, but mostly reminds speakers to “be careful how you use humor” and to go with the “safest humor” (1996 263-264, 477). Similar examples can be found throughout recent literature, reflecting hesitance or ambivalence about humor.⁴

Ignoring the constraints humor faces in various contexts would indeed be imprudent, as news headlines about botched jokes frequently attest. But what such examples highlight is the relationship between humor and decorum. In essence, as much as some scholars emphasize humor’s role in inspiring novel thoughts or critically engaging problems, others forgo humor. To provide insights into this longstanding tension, this paper turns to Quintilian’s treatment of this subject. Current scholarship underscores how the ancient world has much to teach us about humor. For instance, unearthing historical forms of humor like aggressive “Juvenalian” as opposed to more lighthearted “Horatian” satires has yielded insights into contemporary comic practices (Holbert et. al 2011, 187).

Book 6, Chapter 3 of Quintilian’s *Institutio Oratoria* speaks to tensions between humor and decorum still being negotiated in the present. Drawing from Cicero’s excursus on the subjects, Quintilian engages the tensions between humor and decorum, proposing *urbanitas* as a truce between the concepts to account for humor’s strengths and weaknesses. I find that the use of *urbanitas* implicitly points readers toward factors that can make humor rhetorical—a socially and emotionally engaged humor that seeks to persuade and has an instrumental, public function. This perspective aligns with Weitz’s (2009) definition of humor as a “social transaction between at least two people through which one party intends to evoke amusement or laughter” (2). For example, a lawyer’s joke intended to elicit laughter *and* to win support from a jury during a trial can be considered rhetorical and instrumental rather than simply expressive.⁵ By contrast, an unintentionally comic situation of a parent tripping on a toy at home could provoke laughter and thereby bring family members together, but this instance is less public and less strategic.⁶

Scholars have noted how Greek and Roman authors raised themes of respectability, etiquette, and modesty in their discussions of humor (Grant 1924, 7; Sloane 2001, 359; Corbeill 1996, 12). This paper advances these lines of inquiry by showing how Quintilian worked between humor and decorum to fashion a robust *urbanitas*-rhetoric. That is, the educator sought to protect rhetoric both from degradation by licentious humor and from suffocation by excessive decorum.

The extended discussion of humor in the *Institutio* is a compelling guide for navigating the risks of gravity and levity in public life. Quintilian's writings provide insights into what Carlson and Peifer (2013) call "the boundaries of discursive responsibility" (333) in humorous discourse—in this case, between humor and decorum and the rhetoric that proceeds from an engagement with these concepts. In what follows, I first sketch the social and political background against which Quintilian constructed his rhetorical theory. I then consider antecedent treatments of decorum by classical Greek and Roman authors, especially Cicero. I proceed to analyze Book 6, Chapter 3 of the *Institutio*. I conclude by addressing the implications of Quintilian's views about the degree to which humor should be used and how much rhetorical humor can or should be taught.

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXTS OF ROMAN HUMOR

Quintilian's reflections on humor cannot be understood apart from Roman social and political life, which provides a rich backdrop for the themes and tensions raised in Book 6, Chapter 3. Particularly relevant to the way the educator worked with humor is the question of how much Romans could freely express themselves under their social and political conditions. Quintilian's concerns over licentious humor and excessive decorum relate to the very possibilities for public speech and how much one could or should joke in Roman contexts.

According to some traditional accounts by scholars like Corbeill (1996), the Roman Empire's repressive and hierarchical measures restricted the possibilities for public uses of humor. In the late Roman Republic, laughter had even been targeted by the state—particularly when, at the end of the civil war, Julius Caesar sent spies to monitor all the jokes Cicero uttered in both public and private settings (7; see also Volpe 1977, 311).⁷ Quintilian has hence been characterized as inhabiting an even “more settled world than the shifting allegiances of Cicero's forum” (Gwynn 1926, 205). Such descriptions create an impression that Romans had little opportunity for speaking their minds in public, leaving rhetoric to take shelter in the schools with a limited range of political uses. Characterized in this way, rhetoric primarily became a matter of style and display as the “informers” (delatores) in the Senate and court system carried out prosecutions in the Emperor's service, leaving little space for public debate (Grube 1965, 257; Mendelson 2001, 281; Kennedy 1969, 17; Walzer 2006, 264; Starr 1965, 51). Under autocratic conditions, humor might be seen as too risky a strategy for Roman citizens, holding the potential to cross perilous lines for appropriate speech and thereby upset authorities.

Yet Lamp (2013) underscores that a declinist thesis—that rhetoric lost ground in the shifts from the principate to Empire—no longer holds. Going back to the Augustan cultural campaigns, the Roman social and political context did not stifle citizens' ability to express themselves in public (6). Regardless of the degree of autocracy implemented across changing political conditions, Roman life provided an active context for “dialogue and persuasion over scripture and edict,” and demanded a communal “intercession between speaker and *populus*” that continually required authorities to heed public opinion and maintain their legitimacy through discourse (Connolly 2007, 6, 11, 14). Romans expected and treasured opportunities for engaged speech among and between leaders and citizens. As this paper will similarly show, the *Institutio* exhibits a productive tension between humor and decorum and thus depicts a more dynamic

context for rhetorical theory and practice than some traditional accounts of Roman humor have maintained.

Many Romans' efforts to create artful speech may have also informed the use of humor in their social and political contexts. In general, Roman rhetoric was an expansion of the poetic/epideictic, and narrow, practical formulations of rhetoric were seen as less important than what could be characterized as a wider "philosophico-literary discourse art" (Walker 2000, ix-x). In the classical world, epideictic and display had not been secondary to the hardheaded practical oratory of civic life; they shaped fundamental commitments and presuppositions as precursors to political thought (9). Since many Romans valued speech that culled from different sources and forms, they often had little reservation in using entertaining or dramatic discourses in persuasive acts.

Social art historians have found empirical support for this perspective in the Roman context. Clarke's (2007) discovery that Roman visual representations are replete with images intended to make viewers laugh—often subversively—highlights the comic freedom Romans enjoyed across political circumstances (1-2, 9). Moreover, Stewart (2010) points out, "no generalisations do justice to the complex role of art in the confrontation of Roman and Greek culture; conventions were upended throughout the empire" (152, 162). Roman innovations show that citizens were not simply an oppressed and humorless bunch; they took some liberties to speak truth to power and express themselves with the tools at hand. In this context, the *Institutio* charts a path between humor and decorum that takes seriously both improvisational, aesthetic expressions and practical gestures of tact and allegiance, highlighting the complexities of Roman speech.

Although Romans spoke their minds with frequency, not all could do so with abandon. Quintilian's political standing played some part in his own ability to express himself in public.

Of no small consequence, Quintilian (2001) found favor through four successive emperors in the early Roman Empire and, at the very least, underscored the risks of insulting an official or ruler: “there are also some people of such established authority and acknowledged respectability that any aggressive language used against them will do the speaker harm” (6.3.33). Romans in lower classes may have had little problem taking aim at their leaders, but Quintilian and his students’ public speech required more of a delicate balancing act, beckoning the model of humor and decorum addressed in the *Institutio*.

While repercussions from above loomed large, Quintilian’s reflections on humor and decorum can also be read as a reaction against Roman humor, especially in the lack of restraint he observed from below. Quintilian (2001) reprimanded the “mistakes” of a pervasive low Roman culture through lists of unbecoming gestures or sounds, such as “all sorts of movements of fingers and lips . . . to clear your throat loudly . . . or with shoulders hunched up to the back of the head, like a wrestler about to engage” (11.3.160). Quintilian’s world was full of such people, who “pant like beasts of burden, or spatter their audience with spittle . . . who indecorously wipe their nose with the back of their hands, or stick out their stomach” (Fantham 1982, 261). In this environment, orators faced a tension between being excessively bound by the state’s strictures or ineffectively licentiousness in their actions.

Given what he viewed as cultural problems and the informers’ uninformed and unethical speech practices in the emperor’s service, Quintilian hence developed a moral view of rhetoric (Winterbottom 1964, 96). In fashioning a path between humor and decorum, however, Quintilian’s nuanced reflections contradict the simplistic account that “the classical approach to the comic” was “essentially sour and troubled by moral scruples” (Berger 1997, 19). To provide further background for many of the distinctions Quintilian draws in his work, I next address some key antecedents to his teachings on humor.

DECORUM, URBANITY, AND RHETORIC: ANTECEDENTS OF QUINTILIAN'S TEACHING ON HUMOR

Quintilian's work on humor draws on several ancient ideas about laughter and decorum. Classical scholars agree that comedy as a genre began with the Athenian cult of Dionysus in a ritualistic violation of all conventions and habits (Greiner 1992, 25). While sophists like Gorgias argued that humor could be useful in upsetting one's "opponents' seriousness with laughter and their laughter with seriousness" (Aristotle 2007, 248), others contended citizens should proceed with greater hesitation. Plato doubted laughter's virtues in the *Philebus*, preferring knowledge and social order to humor's pleasures; while in Book 7 of the *Laws*, he argued comedy originated in vice and that laws were necessary to check its use in the ideal state (Cooper 1997, 1457-1490; Grant 1924, 19). Aristotle's discussion of the subject in the second book of *On Poetics* was lost, but he made clear that there are forms of humor, "of which some are appropriate for a gentleman to use and some not" (Aristotle 2007, 248)—a theory that "contained the germs of the doctrine of propriety which was later developed much more fully" by the Romans (Grant 1924, 8).

Many classical sources address humor's appropriateness, or decorum. Early Greek philosophers and Aristotle focused on humor's ethics and admissibility, and used the terms "*to prepon*" (what is fitting) and "*harmottein*" and *kairos*" (timeliness) (Rabbie 2007, 214; Hariman 2001, 199). An earlier, "sophistic orientation" to appropriateness focused on a comprehensive, amoral "creative adaptation to characteristic expectations" through fast and timely responses (Hariman 2001, 200, 202). In the Roman context, Cicero and Quintilian stressed "ethical" balance and harmony, and some studies even suggest that Cicero made "propriety" a universal rule of social life (Hariman 2001, 204; Leff 1990). Cicero (2008) wrote that "if the concept of the fitting [decorum] means anything at all, it is surely nothing more than keeping our whole life

and all our activities on an even keel within it, and we cannot achieve that if we forsake our own nature . . . we should not contaminate our activities and our entire lifestyle with any incongruities” (1.111). Cicero’s decorum was a “combination of the law of nature *and* social custom” that not only described an aristocratic ideal, but also was “the partner of Roman republican justice, the vehicle of popular persuasion and communal trust, [and] the bedrock of citizenship and public discourse” (Connolly 2007, 20, 268).

Related to decorum, the term *urbanitas* made its first appearance in Cicero’s *Pro Caelio* in 56 BC (Ramage 1963, 392). Cicero wrote that “vituperation has no settled object except insult and if anyone is attacked in that way with ill-temper it is called abuse; but if it is done with a sort of wit or mirth, it is then styled [*urbanitas*] bantering” (Cicero 2013, 36; Cicero 1913, 6b). The term carried connotations of gentlemanly, decorous speech or of a polished, urbane rather than country-bred individual (Ramage 1963, 390-391). From the concept’s first use, Cicero linked *urbanitas* and humor, and advised in *De Oratore* that “it is essential to possess a certain esprit and humor, the culture that befits a gentleman . . . combined with refinement, grace, and urbanity” (2001, 1.17). Cicero saw education, charm, and culture as warranting this overall quality of being, from which a certain type of humor would proceed.

De Oratore makes two points about humor that are pertinent to Quintilian’s treatment of the topic: first, rhetors should become more aware of moments when humor puts rhetoric at risk and, second, they should expand their use of humor, applying some systematic thought to how it works. Cicero’s (2001) humor theories occupy much of Book 2 (2.216b-290). He was sometimes accused of joking too much, so some scholars believe Cicero’s excursus attempted to “justify humor to such critics” (Krostenko 2001, 224). In the book, the author puts Crassus and Antonius in conversation with Caesar, who can be considered Cicero’s spokesperson. Caesar voices some ambivalence about the subject at the outset: humor generally cannot be taught, has resisted

systematic treatment, and is a “trivial matter,” but should be covered since much can be “accomplished in trials by good cheer and witticisms” (Cicero 2001, 2.218-219). From the start, the contrast between humor’s aspects as a “trivial” subject and a strategic technique positions rhetoric as a higher order matter in the discussion.

That humor can put such rhetoric at risk emerges at several junctures. *De Oratore* points out that “the entire subject matter of the humorous consists of defects found in the lives of people who are neither well esteemed nor wretched” (Cicero 2001, 2.238; 2.264). Cicero focused an early tension between humor and decorum in both praising urbane wit while recognizing that a key to humor appeared to lie in “a certain dishonorableness and ugliness” (2.236). Decorum invites an alignment with ideal, high social/natural customs, while humor tends to drag rhetors downward toward flawed, lowly thoughts and actions. The discussants’ main question on the topic follows from these binds: “to what *extent* must the humorous be employed” (2.237; emphasis added)?

The following passages wrestle with this question, working between humor’s license and decorum’s expectations. Cicero’s (2001) characters make clear how crucial restraint becomes when dealing with people held in high esteem, so two kinds of jokes should always be avoided: those of “buffoons” and the practices of “mimes”—a crude, low art during Cicero’s time (2.237-239). Moderation and economy of saying can distinguish “orators” from abusive “buffoons” (2.247), as exemplified by Scipio’s clever, elegant remark: “Is there anyone more knavish than this Naevius” (2.249)? On the other hand, Cicero provides one example of ineffective humor: when the president of a court told Philippus that he could question a witness of small height, “so long as you keep it short,” and Philippus riffed on the joke with “I will be questioning just a tiny bit.” The statements may have been funny for the president and Philippus, but one of the jurors was even shorter and so this was “totally buffoonish” (2.245). Proceeding from a point that jokes

should attend to the people, case, circumstances, and authorities involved in a situation (2.229), lacking tact and a sense for the different audiences simply made for bad rhetorical practice, no matter how funny the joke may be.

With a sense for the potential distance between humor and decorum, Caesar further tells Crassus and Antonius that there is a difference between the “funny” and “witty,” with a clown enacting the former but not the latter (Cicero 2001, 2.251). Generally, humor should not involve that which crosses into the territory of the “peevish, superstitious, suspicious, boastful, and stupid” (2.251). Similar to crude miming, orators should only imitate others secretly since it does not fit a “well-bred person” to distort one’s face or practice obscenity (2.252). After all, audiences want more forceful weapons than humor in dealing with true villains (2.237). This implies that humor should at least have some suasive quality.

De Oratore suggests that rhetors should also expand their use of humor. So long as advocates are aware of how persuasion may be jeopardized by certain forms of humor under different conditions, Book 2 advises that much freedom can be had with joking. The effect jokes can have on audiences shows that Caesar seeks more than polite decorum or understatement—he wants humor to stand the best chance to engage others enthymematically. Jokes may involve slight imitations of gesture or features, for example, but should be handled delicately so that “the hearer imagines more than he actually sees” (Cicero 2001, 2.242-243). Humor should be employed for both the speaker’s and audience’s benefit, stirring the imagination to support an advocate’s appeals. Since laughter tends to overtake a person beyond her or his control, the author thinks reactive, spontaneous wit lacking premeditation provides the best opportunity to show an orator to be “refined, to be educated, to be well bred; and especially because it soothes and relaxes sternness and severity” (2.230, 2.236, 2.246). The problem of the “extent” to which

humor should be used does not disappear, however, since Caesar surmises that such flights of fancy and impromptu quips need to be careful to maintain some “plausibility” (2.264).

De Oratore’s turn to various divisions and sub-divisions of the topic supports this expansion of humor’s uses. The book categorizes the humorous between “content” and “words,” with the most robust humor combining the two (Cicero 2001, 2.248). Humor is focused primarily on “content” when it is still funny no matter what words are used, while the latter type of humor derives its force from “words” alone (2.252). One joke in which the words do most of the work involves Scipio telling a ranked horse-rider (*eques*) he wished to demote: “‘You’ll have to drive an ass, if you cannot drive an ox,’ implying ‘You may now ride your ass, since you have no horse anymore’” (194). Although the rider’s horse was at stake, the joke derived additional force from a correspondence between the animals and the rider’s actual name, “Asellus” or “Mr. Ass” (2.258). A lot of word-based humor arises from this type of ambiguity (2.250), and Caesar largely endorses the freedom such humor affords. Humor’s capacity to reinterpret can also make for elegant messages, as when an advocate changed the acronym AFPR (Account for the Promises of Rutilius) in some legal books to “Aemilius Finagled; Punishment for Rutilius” (2.280).

Although Caesar began his discussion in Book 2 with the point that it is difficult to conceptualize humor, the list of humorous techniques he provides later in the book implies that some methodical insights bear upon the topic. He praises tropes such as irony—saying one thing but meaning another—with Socrates deemed a great example (Cicero 2001, 2.269-270). Similarity also plays a major role in humor, as do exaggerations like Crassus’s: “[Memmius] thinks he is so high up that, when coming into the forum, he ducks his head under Fabius’ arch” (2.265-267). Given that spontaneous quips are best, nothing generates humor quite like “the unexpected turn” (2.284); for example, when opponents deny you a quality that you grant them,

“as Gaius Laelius did when a certain low-born character said to him that he was unworthy of his ancestors. ‘But I say,’ Laelius retorted, ‘you are worthy of yours’” (2.286).

Yet *De Oratore*’s conclusion about humor in Book 2 provides the most intriguing grounds for Quintilian’s eventual answers to the question of how much humor should be used. Caesar maintains that he has divided humor up into too many categories *and* that one’s very nature must ultimately match up with the outlined humor types (Cicero 2001, 2.289). With decorum in view, Cicero finishes with an uneasy tension between the *techne* of humor and the inherent natural/social abilities that also appear to be required for the art. Despite this bind, in his final comment Antonius shifts the weight of commentary back to humor’s potential, asserting he will now be “much bolder where joking is concerned. For I am no longer afraid that anyone will think me too frivolous in this respect” as a result of listening to Caesar’s remarks (2.290). On the way to decorum, Cicero’s characters argue, one can be bolder with humor.

RHETORICAL HUMOR IN THE *INSTITUTIO ORATORIA*

Quintilian answers his predecessor’s question about how much humor should be used: to the extent that it can be rhetorical. The *Institutio* promotes a socially and emotionally engaged humor that seeks to persuade and has an instrumental, public function. Quintilian’s view of rhetoric, which included emotions, bodily qualities, and more, is noteworthy for its expansive rhetorical emphases (Lamp 2013, 25). Similarly, far from some static, moralistic view of humor, Quintilian’s treatment of the subject shows that the educator cared about and struggled with the dynamic relationship between humor and decorum. Through urbanity, Quintilian ultimately tries to pin down some factors that can make humor rhetorical.

Book 6, Chapter 3 lists the general sources of the laughable, identifies the loci for humor, draws from a rhetorical vocabulary to apply this approach to an argument’s parts, and then

finally connects humor and various commonplaces. Beyond this structure, even more important is how the *Institutio*, like *De Oratore*, appraises humor's potential for rhetorical elegance while cautioning about the subject's dangerous side. This section will therefore start by analyzing how *urbanitas* can work between humor and decorum to fashion a rhetorical humor, before moving through what Quintilian views as more problematic aspects of joking.

Quintilian's (2001) twin desire to harness humor as a resource *and* serve social and political expectations for decorum beckoned "urbanity," or "language displaying a taste of the city (*urbs*) in words, accent, and usage, and a sort of unobtrusive learning derived from the conversation of the educated; in sum, it is the opposite of 'rusticity'" (6.3.17-18). At first glance, this may seem like the lecturing of an elitist prude. But in the context of the book's discussion of humor, urbanity is introduced to make humor skillful and fulfill its persuasive potential. Undoubtedly, overtones of classism run through such passages, but the "taste of the city," "unobtrusive learning," and "educated" themes are mostly focused on the possibilities of creating germane, effective humor. Moreover, despite Quintilian's seemingly stark language about the differences between urbanity and rusticity in such passages, they are not total opposites, a point that will become clearer when these concepts are juxtaposed with anti-rhetorical, scurrilous humor.

Quintilian (2001) cites several sayings of Domitius Marsus to deepen the connections between humor, decorum, and *urbanitas* (6.3.104-105).⁸ Marsus wrote that "Urbanity is a virtue of language concentrated in a brief saying, and adapted to delight men and move them to any kind of emotion, but especially suitable for resisting or challenging according to the needs of individual circumstances or persons" (6.3.104). Quintilian notes that if we bracket brevity, this captures "all the virtues of oratory. For it depends on circumstances and persons" (6.3.105). The focus on adaptation and "resisting or challenging" positions *urbanitas* as a way to engineer

rhetorical humor, according to the same purposes of good speech more generally. After all, “whatever is well said will also count as ‘urbanely’ said” (6.3.106).

For Quintilian, “*urbanitas* is based not so much on humor and wit, as on a language, attitude, and expression free from any alien element or dissonance” (Rabbie 2007, 216). Moreover, his emphasis on the good person speaking “well” can be read as intentionally ambiguous—“well” signifies a “complex totality” including good grammar, moral correctness, practical value, and aesthetic resonance (Pernot 2005, x, xi). In this light, the nexus where humor and decorum meet signifies a multi-faceted act translating to rhetorical excellence—an act where the linguistic, performative, and contextual dimensions of human action merge.

Looking to figures who modeled the use of rhetorical humor highlights the critical role of urbanity in bringing about this state of being. Quintilian compares Demosthenes, who did not have much success with humor, with Cicero, whom others charged with having gone too far with jokes. Quintilian (2001) disagrees with the latter characterization, since Cicero “had a really remarkable quality of urbanity” and “produced more witty remarks than anybody” (6.3.4). For instance, Cicero used a humorous rebuttal to an opponent who had told lies about his age: “in that case, when you and I were declaiming together, you had not been born” (6.3.73). On the other hand, Cicero’s urbane wit can also be contrasted with the excesses of the declaimers—whom Quintilian lambastes in other books for their overwrought and pompous behavior. Quintilian thus suggests that urbanity should not be degraded by a social and emotional expressiveness out of tune with persuasive purposes (see 3.8.58-60).

This emphasis upon urbane, strategic public purposes makes the possibilities for humor dynamic and variable. For example, it is not the case that Cicero was fine with joking invectives while Quintilian admonished avoiding them in all circumstances. One could easily miss *how* Quintilian created space for “insults” which “can also be neatly used. When Hispo was charged

with particularly outrageous crimes, he said to his accuser ‘Are you measuring me by your own standards?’” (Quintilian 2001, 6.3.101) In other words, if humor rises to a level of urbane rhetoric, orators actually have much room for license. Similar to Cicero’s constructions, Quintilian finds that “the number of species of speaking wittily is as infinite as those of speaking seriously, for they depend on persons, places, times, and finally chance, which is most variable of all” (6.3.102). Like rhetoric itself, humor requires an artful dance between theory, audience, and the sifting of purposeful messages—since “it seems to me that even some jokes can be classed as not sufficiently ‘urbane’” (6.3.106).

Quintilian describes urbanity in performative terms and thereby highlights the variability and contingency of socially and emotionally engaged humor. When orators point out faults in others in a way that does not reflect negatively on themselves, the action can be described in terms of “urbanity” (Quintilian 2001, 6.3.8). Urbanity involves both “nature and opportunity” (6.3.8). Rhetors have to work with their personal aptitudes, but they are not completely bound by them. It is thus possible for “country folk to say witty things” (6.3.12-13), showing that citizens are not completely limited by class and social status—qualities of urbanity and good rhetoric potentially can be performed by anyone. Quintilian stresses the effort required to strike this balance between humor and decorum, comparing the easiness of folly with the harder rhetorical task of creating humor that “takes some contribution of our own to make the result ‘urbane’” (6.3.71).

That both Cicero and Quintilian spotlighted humor in the Roman courts shows that jokes should serve rhetorical purposes in public settings where much is at stake. Cicero’s treatment of humorous advocacy in the Roman courts and its positive public functions inspired Quintilian (2001) on the topic (6.3.42). He sees prospects for humor in making lively, brief statements and in ameliorating tensions between opposing parties (6.3.45, 9). Quintilian compares humor to

“salt” that can give a “thirst for listening” (6.3.19), and, as an advocate in the court system, welcomes any tactic that “arouses the judge’s laughter and so dispels these gloomy emotions, frequently diverts his attention from the facts, and sometimes also refreshes or restores him when he is bored or tired” (6.3.1). But showing the social and emotional adaptability necessary to rise to this level, urbanity should steer a level-headed course through “who is saying what, in what Cause, before what court, and against whom” (6.3.28).

Can and should rhetorical humor be taught, then? Quintilian’s answer appears to be “yes.” His listing of several sub-divisions of humor implies there are enough observable patterns that should permit orators to be bolder than they thought possible. Quintilian (2001) discerns that “similitude is the most important element” (6.3.60), while humor also gains from arguments about “genus, species, properties, differences, conjugates, adjuncts, consequences, antecedents, contraries, causes, effects, and comparisons with greater, lesser, or equal things” (6.3.66).

Essentially, an education in commonplaces can serve as an education in humor. Simulation and dissimulation are the biggest ways to generate laughter; “simulation amounts to faking an opinion of one’s own, dissimulation to pretending not to understand what others mean” (Quintilian 2001, 6.3.85). The potential for fictional rhetoric can be especially elegant in shifts “from like to like, when we borrow for one object circumstances which normally belong to another,” and even contraries like “You are more lustful than any eunuch” (6.3.65). Orators should exploit the rhetorical potential of hyperbole, as in “Publius Oppius’ comment on the family of Lentuli, in which the children were always less tall than the parents: ‘They will die out by being born?’” (6.3.67). Jests that rely on “disappointing expectation,” or “taking words in a different sense” are perhaps the most “elegant of all the devices in this whole area” (6.3.84). One example is when meaning is turned from “the serious to the less grave, like the man who was asked what he thought of the man caught in the act of adultery, and answered ‘Too slow’”

(6.3.88). Quintilian urges orators to internalize such commonplaces, providing mental avenues for humorous arguments adapted to the circumstances at hand.

Humorous proverbs and quotes can also rise to the level of rhetorical technique, as when someone with a bad character falls and receives a response like “Let someone help you up who doesn’t know you” (Quintilian 2001, 6.3.98). Quintilian culls from Cicero’s technique of “adding, removing, or changing letters,” like replacing “Placidus” with “Acidus” “because of his acid temper” (6.3.53). Beyond exploiting ambiguities, orators should be on the lookout for inventions where possible, like Juba’s response to a man who thought a horse had kicked mud on him: “What? Do you take me for a Centaur?” (6.3.90) Through various divisions, Quintilian shows that the stakes for rhetors to use humor well remain high. Tellingly, he draws attention to how people used to “teach” humor “on holidays when special license was permitted,” meaning that “there was nothing to forbid the composition of themes giving scope to [humor]” (6.3.15-16).

Quintilian reviews the available means of bridging decorum and humor and negotiates the tension between the two via *urbanitas*. Because “urbanity means something in which nothing that is incongruous, coarse, unpolished, or exotic can be detected in meaning, words, pronunciations, or gesture” (Quintilian 2001, 6.3.106-107), a rhetor’s attitudes, words, and behaviors can align so that neither humor’s license nor decorum’s necessities are overlooked in achieving one’s rhetorical intentions. Ultimately, since good joking “resides not so much in individual words as in the whole tone of speech” (6.3.107), learning various techniques can be useful, but a larger lesson of Book 6, chapter 3 is this: *a fully liberated humor or a completely constraining decorum are both too limiting for broader rhetorical purposes.*

Turning to humor’s darker side, the *Institutio* makes evident that rhetors should maintain a certain degree of control over their training and speech or risk rhetorical failure. Central to

Quintilian's reasoning, *urbanitas* highlights a tension between study and spontaneity.

Quintilian's general pedagogical project endeavored to create a "good man" distinguished from the "informers"—who thought rhetorical rules and theories unnecessary to effective communication, so that only natural eloquence without work, method, or discipline mattered (Holcomb 2001b, 55; Quintilian, 12.10.40;). Quintilian stressed decorum and moral propriety as a response to the informers' focus on *ingenium* (natural ability) (Winterbottom 1964, 92).

Although Quintilian (2001) believed "the greatest fruit of our studies, the richest harvest of our long labours . . . is the power of improvisation" (10.7.1), he saw improvised speaking as the result of lengthy training in rhetorical rules. He wanted students to speak extemporaneously to the best of their ability, or at least far better than if this training not been inculcated (Holcomb 2001b). Therefore, to strike a balance between humor and decorum rhetors must engage in education *and* the cultivation of socially skilled oratory.

Along the same lines, as matters that are systematic/unsystematic and controllable/uncontrollable, humor and laughter present challenges for orators' ethics and effectiveness. Quintilian (2001) draws from Cicero in explaining that "though many have tried, I do not think anyone gives a satisfactory account of the causes of laughter" (6.3.6), and "the difficulty is increased by the fact that there are no exercises and no teachers on this subject" (6.3.14). If systematic rhetoric guides lack treatment of this elusive topic, Quintilian also surmises that laughter is "commanding and irresistible," breaking out "against our will, and not only forces the face and the voice to confess it, but convulses the whole body with its violence" (6.3.9). Urbane rhetorical humor benefits from some systematic instruction, without being overly hobbled by it. After all, "there is no one principle by which laughter is aroused," and "nothing is less witty than what is spoken as witty" (6.3.7, 26). If spontaneous, reactive wit is best (as it was

for Cicero), humor creating an appearance that the orator paradoxically is both in control without being overly controlling increases rhetoric's persuasive potential.

Finding a place for urbane rhetoric in humor is still no easy matter. Extending Cicero's theme, Quintilian (2001) remarks that one of humor's chief difficulties concerns how it is "commonly untrue, often deliberately distorted, and moreover . . . never complimentary . . . judged not on rational principles but by a feeling which cannot be put into words" (6.3.6). Again, if attention to decorum elevates an orator, humor's topoi and responses tend to point downward in ways counteracting rhetorical purposes. Since "laughter is not far from derision," Quintilian hence admits some "ambivalence" about this subject (6.3.7). For example, the loss of humility in self-deprecating humor could diminish one's credibility: "To make a joke against oneself is normally a matter for the professional jester (*scurra*), and is at any rate not to be approved in an orator" (6.3.82). Here, the use of *scurra* is noteworthy in relation to urbanity. In addition to "jester," Russell explains that a *scurra* also refers to "a man about *town* who dined out on his jokes, a professional buffoon" (Quintilian 76; emphasis added). Lamp (2014) further notes how *scurra* relates to off-putting humor or *scurrilitas*, which both Cicero and Quintilian critique, while the *Oxford Latin Dictionary* defines a *scurra* as "a fashionable *city* idler" who has "untimely" and "offensive wit" (Glare 1982, 1713; emphasis added). Being in or of the city is hence no guarantee of urbanity; the environment's luxuries and vices are filled with professional wags whose disconcerting, excessive humor creates bumbling speech rather than suasive rhetoric.

From an opposite side, rusticity can be defined in terms of "living or [being] situated in the country (esp. w. implication of awkwardness or ignorance)," with connotations of "uncouthness" and "provinciality" (Glare 1982, 1671-1672; as mentioned, Quintilian 2001 contrasts *urbanitas* with rusticity in 6.3.17-18).⁹ Although Quintilian positioned *scurra* with the

city and rustics with the country, he is not against either place. Instead, the educator uses the city and country references to show how rhetorical humor requires an informed adaptation to an audience. Where the rustic runs the danger of a provincial humor that stoops too low, the *scurra*'s indulgences equally run the risk of alienating others through a bloviating wit. Both cases are examples of poor rhetorical choices.

Consistent with Quintilian's prior definitions, *urbanitas* refers to "the qualities typical of a city-dweller, sophistication, polish" (Glare 1982, 2105). Critically, its stems also comport with "the residential buildings on a country estate" or "land in the country that has been built on" (2105). By implication, urbane, rhetorical humor has the country and city's virtues, it is able to play in multiple spaces betwixt and between circumstances, people, and more, as Quintilian has already made clear about humor in the courtroom. *Urbanitas* avoids the extremes of rusticity and scurrilousness, then, expanding rhetorical adaptability and modes of persuasion.

Having proposed that all kinds of humor might be permitted if sufficiently urbane (or rhetorical), Quintilian (2001) warns readers about obscure or vulgar jokes, "which the lowest of the low bandy around, in which the ambiguity commonly turns into abuse, even the kind which sometimes escaped from Cicero's lips, though never in court" (6.3.47). While generally following Cicero's focus on humor, here *urbanitas* tips the discussion slightly in decorum's favor. Partly, as Meador (1970) finds, Quintilian shifted a focus for rhetoric from "art" to the "artist," spotlighting the "orator" rather than simply "oratory" (162). But the emphasis upon "never in court" shows that in a public setting where the stakes of persuasion are very high, it is rhetoric's potential failure that is most important. After all, "no one will tolerate a prosecutor who makes jokes in a horrendous case" (Quintilian 2001, 6.3.32).

Sometimes the line between humoring and angering an audience runs so thin that the stakes for orators and oratory remain too high (Quintilian 2001, 6.8.83). Given official,

governmental settings like courts, with their many rules and procedures for communicating, obscenity “should not only be banished from [a rhetor’s] language, but should not even be hinted at” (6.3.29). Quintilian likely has his eye on conducting safe political criticism, but he appears less interested in protecting social boundaries than remaining keenly attentive to the relational dynamics that might promote or hinder one’s rhetoric across *any* circumstance. Principally, one should “have nothing to do with the notion that it is better to lose a friend than lose a jest” (6.3.28).

The rhetorician makes important exceptions to such rules in cases where one’s humor has rhetorical value. Moving beyond disgust with uncouth gestures, Quintilian (2001) asserts that “on occasion, a look, an expression of the face, or a gesture which is not without urbanity” could be permitted (6.3.26). Moral scruples may weigh upon orators, but they should not limit the rhetorical imagination. In particular, humor’s capacity to move beyond the boundaries of direct forms of discourse carries the most potential for elegance or ineptitude. The range of expression humor permits calls for more robust forms of rhetoric than simple rules for polite behavior, as illustrated by Quintilian’s list of techniques that can be used in courts.

CONCLUSION

Surveying his context and following Cicero, Quintilian examines humor’s benefits and liabilities, using *urbanitas* to point toward a humor suited to the orator’s task. As humor’s responsibilities and boundaries are debated to this day, with some emphasizing the importance of humor and others fearing its use, Quintilian provides one way of striking a balance between these concerns in the present. If humor may rise to the level of socially and emotionally engaged, instrumental rhetoric it is likely worth using; if not, individuals might remain more cautious

about employing the strategy. Relative to this point, a few implications that speak to the theory and pedagogy of contemporary humor are worth underscoring.

First, Quintilian teaches orators in the present to concentrate on humor's capacity to serve effective and ethical rhetoric. It may be the case that "no [other] Roman writer puts quite so much emphasis on the moral character of the orator" (Kennedy 1969, 123). But at least in his account of humor, Quintilian puts both joking and morality in the service of elegant rhetoric, demonstrating that humor's effectiveness can permit orators to breach lines that often cannot be crossed by other forms of discourse. The question of whether or not an attempt at humor might be considered rhetorical provides a different focus than common lists of principles advising, for instance, "use humor" or "never be offensive" in public speech. As Quintilian's distinctions highlight, even insults might be permitted when humor is a means to rhetorical ends.

In this vein, contemporary rhetors should take seriously how Quintilian struggled with humor's "rhetorical efficacy versus ethical peril" (Perks 2012, 129, 126). Especially in social and political contexts where orators have to work between "ideals of republican citizenship and imperial courtly life" (Connolly 2007, 21), or citizens' freedoms and stately constraints, the educator instructs orators to keep their eyes firmly on how rhetoric may be either served or hindered by humor. Through *urbanitas*, Book 6, Chapter 3 collapses the distinction between ethics and efficacy, with rhetorical humor constituted through a holistic act in which one's speech, actions, and character align as appropriate to the circumstances, case, and people involved. Quintilian's reflections on humor show that orators are not simply bound by a teleological morality (see Brinton 1983, 174, 183), nor that jokes can be reduced only to arousing emotion and contagion in the courtroom (see Katula 2003, 10). Rather, to rise to a level of "rhetorical" humor is to hit a moving target, so working between humor and decorum requires a

trained but adaptive mind comfortable with both study and spontaneity, an ability to magnify and constrain joking for suasive purposes.

Second, to address the chasm between praise for humor in public culture and reservations about the topic in rhetorical pedagogy, one can fruitfully compare and contrast Quintilian's ideas with figures and contexts outside his own. In particular, comparing Quintilian and Cicero's thoughts on humor teaches rhetors that they could probably be using humor more than they thought possible. Building from *De Oratore*, Quintilian shows that a place for humor should be found in both public culture and educational curricula.

At the same time, while generally supportive of orators' efforts to study and use humor skillfully, Book 6, Chapter 3 might be read as too tipped in decorum's favor for social and political contexts beyond Quintilian's. Given the educator's larger theoretical project for an orator who is a "good man," he mainly positioned ethical decorum above aesthetic considerations (Ryan 1929, 176; see Quintilian 2001, 11.1.62-72). At the very least, as Connolly (2007) makes clear, Quintilian did not "expect his students to participate in the ruling practices of Cicero's age"; humor and performativity became far more domesticated and internalized in Quintilian's outlook (255-256). In this respect, Quintilian may have been too close to those in political power to theorize what more critical forms of humor could look like, forgoing one of humor's functions—temporarily freeing humans from "over-identification," or the symbolic enticements and emotional allegiances of their contexts (Heller 2005, 202, 208, 212; Morreall 2009).

To push the point further, consider another ancient author, Aristophanes, whose plays show how humor can have even more bite and spite than Quintilian presumes. Aristophanes and Quintilian occupied very different stations in life, with the former writing comedies that were performed in front of mixed democratic audiences in Greece, while the latter was in the business

of educating proper gentlemen in Rome. Relative to humor, both figures' writings highlight the value of exaggeration, irony, reversals of expectation, physicality, escalation, and wordplay, to name only a few strategies for comic effect.¹⁰ But Aristophanes diverged from the type of theory Quintilian detailed, opposing decorous ceremony and the affectations of those in powerful positions, combining humor and moral teaching by "playing off accepted attitudes and recognized social roles, reconstructing or rearranging them in order to bring out absurdities and expose unwarranted pretensions" (Konstan 1995, 6; "Index" n.d.). In Aristophanes' humor, some loss of urbanity or decorum appear to have been attended by gains for ethical and effective rhetoric, showing that some rhetors can likely tip their speech more in humor's favor.

Similar approaches to humor can be found in the Roman context, with Clarke (2007) discovering that, "when I look at what the Romans found funny I repeatedly discover carnival: values (temporarily) turned upside down"; verbal humor often went against behavioral codes while visual humor lambasted the state, gods, and emperors, doing anything but serving or being co-opted by the existing powers (7-8). Many of Quintilian's reflections were a reaction against this kind of Roman merrymaking, underscoring how humor by the more or less powerful should probably take different forms. Yet as much as Quintilian's reserve might be highlighted, Aristophanes and similar figures could be similarly charged with excess. Putting the two figures together, it is precisely the space between restraint and excess that has to be worked out by orators keeping rhetoric firmly in view.

In the present, for instance, U.S. presidents' public jokes over the past 50 years have become increasingly rhetorical. Presidential speech has shown how a willingness to joke about riskier topics from personal scandals to circulating controversies have frequently yielded political benefits, as in President Obama's White House Correspondent Dinner speech jokes addressing accusations that he is not a U.S. citizen.¹¹ At times, presidents have modeled an

urbane humor that has effectively allowed them to do and say more than other forms of speech permit, while also showing that jokes can result in scandals when they fail to consider how decorum might inform the people, cases, and circumstances with which they are dealing. Regardless of the differences between the *Institutio* and other works, Quintilian's advice to be bolder with joking but also guard against narrow, rustic humor that risks stooping too low, or indulgent, scurrilous humor that exceeds its welcome still remain apt considerations for contemporary political figures.

Last, the way Quintilian dealt with humor sits well with developing research promoting expansive and nuanced pedagogies for humor. Given long-standing binaries between levity as unserious and gravity as serious that historically stalled inquiry in this area (see McGhee 2010), Quintilian would have us raise the status of the comic relative to rhetorical purposes, noting that in the edifice of the laughable, gravity "adds greatly to the charm" (Quintilian 2001, 6.3.26). Through such comments, Quintilian presented students with distinctions later developed in, for example, Huizinga's (1949) insight that "the play concept . . . is of a higher order than seriousness. For seriousness seeks to exclude play, whereas play can very well include seriousness" (45). After decades of research, Morreall (2009) similarly concluded that humor needs to be treated more seriously in academia and beyond, a point with which Cicero's and Quintilian's early expositions clearly wrestled. Most important, the emerging literature on humor's social and health benefits empirically establishes that divisions between the serious and non-serious need to be radically rethought for public culture.¹²

Following Cicero, Book 6, Chapter 3 of the *Institutio* points toward the possibility of better teaching in this confusing area. Having argued that humor should be used to the extent that it can be rhetorical, Quintilian implicitly established that humor can and should be taught. While still in its infancy, some scholarship has begun to promote the creation of entire courses in the

study and practice of humorous communication (e.g. DiCioccio 2012). At the same time, Quintilian may be one of our best forebears on the possibility for humor to turn sour, which parallels recent research spotlighting the topic's darker side (Lockyer and Pickering 2009; Meyer 2000; Waisanen, 2013).

However productive pedagogy in this area might become, Quintilian would have us consider the responsibilities of humorous rhetoric, striking a moderate ground between a bloviating wit and suffocating propriety. Ultimately, we learn from the *Institutio* that the conflict between humor and decorum is not to be overcome, but kept alive by orators constantly attentive to the multiple dimensions in evolving speech situations.

NOTES

¹ While it has nothing to do with this paper's focus, there is also a magazine article with this title ("Stars" 1964).

² In an encyclopedia entry on rhetoric and humor, Sloane (2001) has also speculated that "deference to decorum, along with slight theorizing, continues in modern public speaking textbooks" (359).

³ Barbara Bush's commencement speech to Wellesley College in 1990 is alluded to as an example of an effective humorous speech. But Lucas (1998) advises: "indeed, the best approach is usually not to work specifically for laughs" (451).

⁴ Gronbeck et. al (1994) recommend only two guidelines—be relevant and use good taste (64-65), similar to Sellnow's (2005) proposal to be merely "realistic, relevant, and repeatable" (207). Fraleigh and Tuman (2011) further admonish speakers to "use humor judiciously," erring on the side of humorous anecdotes and narratives rather than jokes (614, 303-305, 617). German et. al (2004) believe humor can unite an audience and comment that "humor can be used to urge general changes and reform social practices," but constantly remind readers that one should use "good taste" to avoid "offending members of the audience" (293, 296-297). Metcalfe (2004) says we "shouldn't be afraid to use humor" even though it "has some risks" and is a "two-edged sword," from which appropriateness should always be the first consideration (139, 138, 177, 183). O'Hair, Rubenstein, and Stuart (2013) state "a good rule of thumb is that speech humor should always match the audience, topic, purpose, and occasion," but elsewhere advise that only "if you are naturally funny, use that skill" (127, 224). Beebe and Beebe (2005) argue humor is good for attention-getters at the beginning of a speech, and conclusions that can put an audience "in a relaxed state of mind," but often does not translate well for diverse audiences (228). Griffin (2004) thinks humor can be effectively employed in speeches, and provides some information about comic timing and functional models. Each step of the way, she urges restraint, especially in her first recommendation, to "always err on the side of caution as you incorporate humor into your speech" (462). To be fair, some texts take a more liberal approach to humor's uses in public speaking. Mudd and Sillars (1991) consider humor an invaluable skill, in both speeches to entertain and inform/persuade. While urging the use of "kindliness" and "good taste," they highlight ways to use wit in a speech: through the use of overstatement, understatement, irony, unexpected turns, play with words, and even the use of burlesque. Sprague and Stuart (1992) set aside a substantial ten pages on humor, advising the "necessity of a playful context" (244), use of strategies such as exaggeration and the unexpected, and the admonishment, "do not devalue your sense of humor and what it might add," while still asking speakers wisely to consider the possibility for irrelevance and offensiveness (244, 248).

⁵ See Gregg's (1971) distinction between expressive and instrumental rhetoric.

⁶ Along these lines, Konstan (1995) underscores the rhetoricity in many ancient forms of humor, especially between Greek Old Comedy involving "bold actions; earthy humor; immediate social or political relevance . . . rich in fantasy and spunk," as opposed to the New Comedy's "naturalism" and "subtle and sympathetic examination[s] of social issues" (4-5). In both cases, however, "an intervention in the ideological life of the classical city-state" made humor public and purposeful, rather than simply entertainment (11).

⁷ Cicero's reservations became evident in a letter stating that "nothing bothers me more in these troubled times than not being able to laugh with you when there's something to be laughed at. And there's a lot; I just don't dare write about it" (as qtd. in Corbeill 174).

⁸ Little is known of Domitius Marsus, who probably lived during the time of Horace. Only a few of his poems and celebrated epigrams survive (Smith 1867, 962). Kühnert found Quintilian does not use any Greek sources in Book 6, Chapter 3; rather, he relied almost exclusively upon Cicero and Marsus's text *De Urbanitate* (as cited in Rabbie 2007, 216).

⁹ Moreover, some gendered overtones play into the rusticity—urbanity—scurrilous continuum. That Romans connected performances of masculinity and femininity with social standing has been well covered in the literature, particularly by Gleason (2008), who finds that gender expectations could be met but also bypassed by skilled rhetoricians adept at strategic self-presentations (she focuses on Favorinus, a eunuch whose effeminate oratory achieved much success). Connotations of the *scurra* as a city flaneur whose softness sits opposite the rustic roughness of country life complicates urbanity and rusticity being total opposites, since many Romans had great respect for the countryside. Yet these categories were continually being negotiated, a point supported by Quintilian's use of urbanity to mediate such categories and raise persuasive possibilities.

¹⁰ That said, Aristophanes conducted no surveys of comic categories. Yet scholars often fall into the trap of overlooking how Aristophanes was well acquainted with rhetoric, actively used rhetorical principles, and hence contributed to its theory (Murphy 1938, 69, 79, 113). Aristophanes' famous attacks on rhetoric were valid criticisms, parodying the political demagoguery of his day, including the self-interested and publicly harmful "style of early rhetoric" that many citizens accepted uncritically (72, 78). Some satirists in the first century even derided Roman rhetoricians like Quintilian for their calls to decorum. Petronius, for example, cast rhetoric as being able to "no more impart good taste than cooks avoid stinking" (Meador 1970, 166)

¹¹ For an overview and further examples of these practices, see Waisanen (2015).

¹² For a comprehensive summary, see McGhee (2010).

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