

3 Cicero (106-43 B.C.)

Though best known as an orator and statesman, Cicero was also keenly interested in philosophy, and believed that philosophy and rhetoric should be combined. In his work *On the Orator* he examines the use of humor in public speaking, discussing such techniques as exaggeration, sarcasm, and punning, and such philosophical topics as the nature of humor and the ethics of its use. In large part he follows what Aristotle had said, but he adds at least one new idea of some theoretical importance, the distinction between humor in what is being talked about, and humor arising from the language used. This distinction is similar to that made today between the comedian, who says funny things, and the comic, who says things funny.

On the Orator, Book II

Ch. 58

The seat and province of the laughable, so to speak, lies in a kind of offensiveness and deformity, for the sayings that are laughed at the most are those which refer to something offensive in an inoffensive manner. . . . But very careful consideration must be given to how far the orator should carry laughter . . . for neither great vice, such as that of crime, nor great misery is a subject for ridicule and laughter. People want criminals attacked with more forceful weapons than ridicule, and do not like the miserable to be derided, unless, perhaps, when they are insolent. You must also be considerate of people's feelings, so that you do not speak rashly against those who are personally beloved.

Ch. 59

There are two kinds of jokes, one of which is based on things, the other on words. }

Ch. 60

Whatever is wittily expressed consists sometimes in an idea, sometimes only in the language used. But people are most delighted with a joke when the laugh is raised by the idea and the language together.

Ch. 63

The most common kind of joke is that in which we expect one thing and another is said; here our own disappointed expectation makes us laugh. But if something ambiguous is thrown in too, the effect of the joke is heightened.

4 Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679)

The Superiority Theory of laughter, which got its start in Plato and Aristotle, was put into a stronger form by Hobbes. Human beings, in his view, are in constant struggle with one another for power and what power can bring. In this struggle the failure of our competitors is equivalent to our success. And so we are all constantly watching for signs that we are better off than others, or, what counts as the same thing, that others are worse off than we are. Laughter is nothing but an expression of our sudden glory when we realize that in some way we are superior to someone else.

From Leviathan, Part I, ch. 6, in English Works, vol. 3, ed. Molesworth (London: Bohn, 1839)

Sudden glory, is the passion which makes those grimaces called laughter; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleases them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves. And it is incident most to them, that are conscious of the fewest abilities in themselves; who are forced to keep themselves in their own favor by observing the imperfections of other men. And therefore much laughter at the defects of others, is a sign of pusillanimity. For of great minds, one of the proper works is, to help and free others from scorn; and compare themselves only with the most able.

From Human Nature, ch. 8, §13, in English Works, vol. 4, ed. Molesworth (London: Bohn, 1840)

There is a passion that has no name; but the sign of it is that distortion of the countenance which we call laughter, which is always joy: but what joy, what we think, and wherein we triumph when we laugh, is not hitherto declared by any. That it consists in wit, or, as they call it, in the jest, experience confutes: for men laugh at mischances and indecencies, wherein there lies no wit nor jest at all. And forasmuch as the same thing is no more ridiculous

when it grows stale or usual, whatsoever it be that moves laughter, it must be new and unexpected. Men laugh often, especially such as are greedy of applause from every thing they do well, at their own actions performed never so little beyond their own expectations; as also at their own jests: and in this case it is manifest, that the passion of laughter proceeds from a sudden conception of some ability in himself that laughs. Also men laugh at the infirmities of others, by comparison wherewith their own abilities are set off and illustrated. Also men laugh at jests, the wit whereof always consists in the elegant discovering and conveying to our minds some absurdity of another: and in this case also the passion of laughter proceeds from the sudden imagination of our own odds and eminency: for what is else the recommending of our selves to our own good opinion, by comparison with another man's infirmity or absurdity? For when a jest is broken upon ourselves, or friends of whose dishonor we participate, we never laugh thereat. I may therefore conclude, that the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly: for men laugh at the follies of themselves past, when they come suddenly to remembrance, except they bring with them any present dishonor. It is no wonder therefore that men take heinously to be laughed at or derided, that is, triumphed over. Laughter without offence, must be at absurdities and infirmities abstracted from persons, and when all the company may laugh together: for laughing to one's self puts all the rest into jealousy and examination of themselves. Besides, it is vain glory, and an argument of little worth, to think the infirmity of another, sufficient matter for his triumph.