TOPICS AND *LOCI COMMUNES*

as agents of cultural unity and diversity[*]

By Marc van der Poel

Topical invention is a systematized method of finding arguments to discuss abstract, philosophical questions and specific questions determined by circumstances of time and space. It was developed in ancient Greece and Rome as the key instrument for producing and interpreting texts, and it continued to be used for similar purposes during the Middle Ages, with some important adaptations particularly in the context of the academic disputatio. *In the Renaissance, the tools of topical invention – topics,* loci communes *and commonplaces – were universally applied in the teaching and practice of reading, writing and reasoning. The purpose of this contribution is to propose that a study of the uses of topical invention in the Renaissance may contribute to our knowledge of the cultural and intellectual unity and diversity during this period.*

Topics and topical invention have been the subject of many studies, but two key aspects have hitherto been practically ignored.[1] First, the theory and practice of the topics in their mutual interaction have not yet received substantial attention, and second, topical invention has never been analysed across time. This leaves a significant gap in our knowledge, because the ways in which topics functioned as channels through which classical patterns of thought and reasoning were transmitted in antiquity and later in European civilization have remained hidden. The aim of this paper is to

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[1] See, on top of the literature mentioned in the course of this contribution, Wagner 2009 and Ostheeren 2009 for brief surveys of topical invention and topics in general from antiquity until the modern period. Curtius 1948 has changed the ancient concept of *topos* and *locus communis* from means of persuasion to typical parts of literary texts, whether as standard elements such as the invocation of the muses at the beginning of a poem or the declaration of love in a romantic story, or as recurring motifs across genres and periods, such as the topic of unequal love between a young woman and an old man, or the topic of the world turned upside down. This modified concept of topic and commonplace, as well as the application of topics in specific disciplines such as theology, jurisprudence and the visual arts, is beyond the scope of the present study.

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propose that a study of these classical patterns and their adaptations in the theory and practice of Renaissance topical invention may contribute to the study of metadiscourse in the project "Cultural Encounter as a Precondition for European Identity." In the perspective of the project, the system of topical invention, as described in theories and practical textbooks of eloquence, constitutes a theoretical framework which we can use to interpret Renaissance texts intended to express and disseminate opinions about topical issues.

The first part of this paper contains an introductory – and by necessity generalizing – survey of the theory and practice of topical invention in antiquity. The second part presents an outline of the reception of topics and topical invention in Renaissance rhetoric, dialectic, and pedagogical literature. It discusses Erasmus's *Declamation on the Praise of Marriage* to illustrate the interaction between the theory and practice of topical invention and how Erasmus's use of topics reflects his moral beliefs.

Topical invention in antiquity: theory and practice

Topical invention teaches the student of rhetoric how to find correct or persuasive arguments by means of topics or "places." It applies to inquiries concerning all subject matter that can be brought up for debate: that is, all matters about which the truth is unknown and for which arguments both for and against can be found. In antiquity, this domain was divided into two parts: dialectic and rhetoric. Dialectic concerns general or abstract questions: that is, questions discussed by philosophers, both in their schools and in the public sphere. Rhetoric concerns practical questions connected to the tangible world in which we live: in antiquity, following a division commonly adopted in ancient theories of eloquence, rhetoric was the domain of orators delivering judicial speeches in courtrooms, political speeches in citizen assemblies, or speeches of praise or blame in private or public ceremonial gatherings. Aristotle taught both dialectic and rhetoric. His *Topics* (*Τοπικά, Topica*), written for students in the Academy of Plato, discusses strategies for finding valid arguments in philosophical discussions; his *Rhetoric* (*Τέχνη ῥητορική, Ars rhetorica*), on the other hand, a compilation of students' notes on his lectures, describes the field of public oratory and presents the various kinds of topics available to the orators and the ways in which they may be used to convince their audiences. Topics figure prominently in both these works, and continued to form the heart of the methods of effective argument in dialectic and rhetoric not only in antiquity after Aristotle, but also after antiquity. Topical invention is more a method than a theory, and the views about it that we find in handbooks over the centuries closely follow the practice of arguing, which varied in accordance with historical and cultural contexts.

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Ancient rhetoricians developed different views on how to set up the topical system for the production of arguments. The key notion in the system of finding arguments is "τόποι" or *loci* (places), the core idea being that the orator in search of arguments is offered a storehouse of arguments in which those arguments are classified systematically and arranged conveniently so that they can be found and produced at once.[2] Which arguments were provided, and the ways in which they were classified in the storehouse –the system of topics – varied from the time of the oldest Greek textbooks onwards, depending on the theoretical insights of the teacher of eloquence and the practical purpose and the audience for which he was writing. Thus one finds specific topics that can be used only in certain cases and circumstances (e.g. in a criminal case, it is important to see if from the course of his previous life you can deduce an argument for or against the defendant, for instance an earlier conviction; this is an argument drawn from the topic "accidents of the person"), in addition to formal topics that can be applied in any discourse (e.g. an argument from the greater to the lesser: if it is possible to find the resources to fight a great war, then it is also possible to find the resources necessary for a small war).[3]

A third category of topics are the κοινοὶ τόποι or *loci communes* (common topics). By the time of Cicero in the first century BCE, there existed a refined classification of *loci communes*. In *De inventione* (2.48), Cicero defines these *loci* as arguments that can be carried over to many cases ("argumenta, quae transferri in multas causas possunt"; cases at law are meant). He discerns two kinds: common topics that contain an elaboration of something that everyone agrees about (*amplificatio certae rei*), and those in which one develops something about which one can argue both for and against (*amplificatio dubiae rei*). By means of an *amplificatio dubiae rei,*

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[2] Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 2.26.1, calls a topic (or an element, στοιχεῖον) a label under which many enthymemes are comprised. Cicero presents topics as the places where arguments can be found (*sedes argumentorum*; *Topica*, 7), as the hunting ground where one chases and examines what one is looking for ("regiones, intra quas venere et pervestiges, quod quaeras": *De oratore* 2, 147), as the store from which arguments are drawn out (*thesauri*; *De finibus* 4,10); Quintilian uses a combination of the metaphors from *Topica*, 7 and *De oratore*, 2, 147. Joannes Mattheus Phrissemius, in his commentary on Rudolph Agricola's *De inventione dialectica*, book 1, chapter 2, appropriately thinks of topics as iron or wooden road signs in the form of a hand pointing travellers in the right direction at road junctions ("ut (..) ferreae aut ligneae manus, quas crucibus in biviis affixas videmus, indicant viatori, qua vertendum sit iter": Agricola 1523, 9r).

[3] The key source texts in antiquity are: Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1.2.21–22; 1.3.7–9; 2.23; ps.-Cicero, *Ad Herennium*, 2. 3–26; Cicero, *De inventione*, 1.34–43; *Topica*, 6–7; 9–23; 26–78; *De oratore*, 2, 152–177; Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, 5.10.20–94. A comprehensive study of the ancient system of topics is still lacking; notably good partial studies are Emrich 1973 and Pernot 1986.

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the orator brings his particular case at hand to the underlying general question, which, according to Cicero, should always be addressed in each case (e.g. in a case involving a defendant who is extravagant, desirous of other people's money, and seditious, the orator should speak about prodigality, avarice, and rebellious and bad citizens; cf. *De oratore* 2.135). This type of *locus communis* was originally a philosophical exercise or θέσις (translated by Cicero alternately as quaestio, [infinita] consultatio, propositum, quaestio quacunque de re, universi generis [communis] quaestio), a type of exercise in which Cicero still trained himself in his adult years (*Ep. Q. fr.* 3.3.4 and *Att.* 9.4). An *amplificatio certae rei*, on the other hand, is a digression on some undisputed matter, either within a rational argumentation or as a means to stir emotions.

Because the *amplificatio certae rei* was often elaborated with careful attention to stylistic embellishment, often in the context of a speech of praise or blame, there has been much discussion among teachers of eloquence about whether these topics are primarily rational or emotional. For example, in his speech delivered in 66 BCE to the popular assembly in Rome in support of the bill of the tribune C. Manilius, Cicero proposed giving general Pompey the sole and supreme command in a difficult war fought by the Roman state in the eastern part of the Empire. This bill was opposed by the Roman Senate because it would entrust Pompey with unprecedented power. Amid a series of arguments about the political implications of the law, Cicero inserts a long digression on the definition of the best general, which he develops by appeal to the sentiments of patriotism, Roman bravery, and moral superiority in such a way as to present Pompey as the best general Rome has ever had and thus the only one to whom the command in this dangerous war can safely be entrusted. This *locus communis* has nothing to do with the merits of Manilius's bill, and it serves in the context of the speech mainly to give concrete shape to the audience's patriotism, in the form of a eulogy of Pompey. Cicero recorded in his *Orator* (102) that he had tailored the style of his entire speech to this eulogy, and two centuries later Marcus Cornelius Fronto wrote that it was the best eulogy ever addressed in either Greek or Latin to a people's assembly (p. 210, 9–14 van den Hout). The speech is not strong on the key political issue at stake, but Cicero did win the argument, and the Lex Manilia was carried. It can be debated whether the function of the *locus communis* was primarily rational or emotional: was the audience rationally persuaded that Pompey was the best qualified general for the war in the east, or did the audience feel that, on account of Cicero's appeal to their patriotism? What is undebated, however, is that the *locus communis* was the key to the success of the speech.

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Topical invention was a standard subject in the ancient schools of rhetoric, and future orators were trained in both types of *loci communes* defined by Cicero in *De inventione*; both the *amplificatio certae rei* and *amplificatio dubiae rei* figure among the series of Greek *progymnasmata* or preliminary exercises preparing the future orator to write and deliver full-scale orations, of which four second- to fourth-century CE collections survive.[4]

In philosophical writing on topics, Aristotle's *Topics* were the key work throughout antiquity. There was an important tradition of writing commentaries on Aristotle's works, and a second-century CE commentary on the *Topics* is still extant. Boethius (sixth century CE), whose commentaries on Aristotle's logical works were the only commentaries in Latin available in the Latin West during the Middle Ages, wrote an entire treatise on topics in dialectic (*De topicis differentiis*).[5] His sharp division, which had not been typical in antiquity, between dialectic as an art concerning general questions and rhetoric as an art concerning practical questions was universally adopted in the Middle Ages. In particular, Boethius's work was very important for the development of topics as a means to test the validity of propositions in philosophical debates at medieval universities. In the medieval rhetorical practice of writing letters and poetry, topics remained the standard method of invention.[6] Boethius also wrote a commentary on Cicero's *Topica*, whose division of topics into those which are inherent to the subject under discussion and those which are drawn to it from without became very influential in the Renaissance.[7]

Topical invention in the Renaissance: theory and practice

This double tradition of discussing and using topics in dialectic and rhetoric was still flourishing at the time when the humanists were rediscovering and studying, in the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the many source texts of classical rhetoric in Latin and Greek that had been unknown during the Middle Ages. The humanists' concern with topics and topical invention originated in their effort to revise the late medieval liberal arts curriculum. In the faculties of arts, this curriculum focused on logic and dia-

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[4] For the *Progymnasmata* see Bonner 1977, chapter XVIII (p. 250–276), Kraus 2005, 159–164, and Kennedy 2003. One of the collections was translated into Latin in late antiquity.

[5] Latin text in Boethius 1847, 1173–1216, English translation Stump 1978.

[6] For the topics in medieval dialectic see Green Pedersen 1984, Peter of Spain 2014, Introduction, 38–41; for the topics in the medieval arts of prose and poetry, see Kelly 2004, p. 13, note 75.

[7] Latin text in Boethius 1847, 1039–1174, English translation Stump 1988. Cicero's *Topica*: Reinhardt 2003.

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lectic, intended to prepare students for the academic study of theology and the other sciences. The humanists advocated the liberal arts as a programme of secular training, including a detailed programme of reading the Greco-Roman classics and of composition exercises, with a twin focus both on writing skills and on moral education aimed at the perfection of the Christian, both as an individual and as a member of the Christian commonwealth. Topics, *loci communes,* and topical invention in general came to play a huge role in the didactics of this humanist programme of liberal education, the *studia humanitatis.* For this reason they figure prominently in the handbooks of rhetoric, whether produced as textbooks for schools and universities or as reference works for teachers and scholars, pastors and ministers, diplomats and public officials.[8] In the field of topical invention, the Renaissance marks the return to the flexible boundary line between dialectic and rhetoric, a line that is visible, for instance, in the discussion of a general, philosophical question in the context of a topical case, for instance the formulation of an advice to an individual person facing a dilemma, such as Erasmus's letter to a young man of noble birth, which we will take a look at below.

The extensive reading programme in the ancient classics, including orators, poets, historians and philosophers, not only provided students with models for imitation, but also supplied them with ready knowledge which was to be made productive in their own writing and thinking. To make this feasible, the humanists developed a method to arrange and memorize data that was, conveniently, similar to the art of memory developed in antiquity for the benefit of philosophers (who had to build a stock of propositions as a source of arguments: Aristotle, *Topics*, 1, 13 105b 13–16) and orators (who had to collect supplies of historical examples, laws, lawyers' opinions, sayings and facts as material to support their arguments or embellish their style: Quintilian, *Inst.*, 11.2.1).[9] The classical system aimed to support the natural memory by means of mental pictures of places (*loci* or *loca*),[10] i.e. localities such as a house with many rooms in which one sets images (*imagines*) of things to remember. The humanistic counterpart of this mnemonic system was generally termed *loci communes* or commonplaces (not to be confused

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[8] See for a brief discussion of the various kinds of manuals of rhetoric in the Renaissance van der Poel 2015, for a comprehensive history of Renaissance rhetoric Mack 2011. Vasoli 2007 (originally 1967) is a standard work on invention and method in the Renaissance.

[9] The mnemonic system was developed after the time of Aristotle, and is described in the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, 3.28–40, Cicero, *De oratore*, 2.350–360, and Quintilian, *Inst.*, 11.2.

[10] *Loci* is the term used by the author of *Ad Herennium* and Cicero; Quintilian uses *loca* (*Inst.* 11.2.17).

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with *locus communis* as *amplificatio certae rei*). This idea was based on the notion that the *loci* or headings used to arrange material collected as we read can be applied in any situation or discourse (e.g. virtue, honour, friendship, and their counterparts, etc.). The memorization and constant repetition of the headings and the data collected under them was thought to produce a storehouse of knowledge readily available for use whenever we need it. The Frisian scholar Rudolph Agricola described this mnemonic system in his pedagogical treatise in the form of a letter, *De formando studio*, written in 1484.[11] The principle which makes his headings ("capita rerum": Agricola does not use the term *locus communis* in this letter) easy to memorize is not visualization (i.e. imagining them as part of a concrete structure, e.g. a house consisting of a series of rooms), but juxtaposition in pairs of contraries: virtue–vice, life–death, learning–ignorance, goodwill–hostility, "and other similar things that are universally and publicly in use (so to speak) for all purposes."[12] Agricola stresses that the key function of this didactic method is not only to make knowledge readily accessible, but also to make it productive, i.e. to enable the student to produce something original in writing: "the second thing is that from what we have learned, we must be capable of discovering and accomplishing something of one's own that goes beyond this [i.e. beyond the things one retains in one's memory], something to claim for ourselves, something that we can positively call our own."[13] In his theory of argumentation, *De inventione dialectica*, completed in 1479,[14] Agricola presented a new system of topics that was intended to make systematically arranged knowledge productive in the composition of texts.

Agricola's De inventione dialectica

In this original work, Agricola built on the work on dialectic by humanists such as Lorenzo Valla – Agricola became intimately acquainted with quattrocento humanism during his stay in Northern Italy between 1469 and 1479 – but he is innovative in his treatment of the topics. Agricola was critical of the distinction made in antiquity between dialectic and rhetoric. He proposed a new approach, in which arguing on general subjects (i.e. dialectic)

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[11] Agricola 2002, 200–219, p. 212–214 for the mnemonic system.

[12] ". . . et reliqua id genus, quorum usus fere communis ad omnia et tamquam publicus sit" (Agricola 2002, p. 212, lines 32–33; translation by Van der Laan-Akkerman).

[13] "Alterum est, ut ex eis, que accepimus, ipsi preter hec invenire aliqua possimus et conficere, que nobis asseramus nostraque esse queamus affirmare" (Agricola 2002, p. 212, lines 27–29; translation by Van der Laan-Akkerman).

[14] Moss 1996, 73–82, has a good discussion of *De formando studio* and the connection between the system of *capita rerum* it describes and Agricola's system of topics in *De inventione dialectica*.

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and arguing on specific subjects (i.e. rhetoric) are combined in one inte-
grated theory. This resulted in a new list of twenty-four topics, based on
Cicero's list in the *Topica*, which had contained both formal and specific
topics.[15] Agricola describes the method of topical invention in two steps.
First, the topics are to be used to describe things as they manifest them-
selves in reality: a procedure that Agricola calls, using a term derived from
ancient rhetoric, *descriptio rei* (description of a thing: book 2, chapter 28).
For instance, a description of "philosopher" will first contain a definition
(the first topic in Agricola's list): "a man who strives after knowledge of
divine and human things, coupled with virtue"; then the species (topic 3) are
"Stoic, Academic, Epicurean and the other schools of philosophers which
can be enumerated"; while the topics of place and time (15 and 16) produce
information concerning the philosopher's place of birth, the place in which
he lives and teaches or the places he visits in order to fulfil his task of being
a corrector of cities and peoples. In the initial phase, the topics are general
headings, comparable to headings in the mnemonic system ("communis
quaedam nota," *De inventione dialectica* 1.2; cf. "capita rerum... quorum
usus fere communis... sit," *De formando studio*, Agricola 2002, p. 212, lines
31–33). In the second phase, however, the topics are seats of arguments as
described by the classical rhetoricians. Here, the items collected under each
given topic in the description of a thing provide arguments once they are
compared with the description of the second thing with which, in the subject
matter taken up for discussion, the first thing is connected: that is, in a
quaestio or question (book 2, chapter 29). Thus in raising for discussion the
question whether a philosopher should marry, first one makes a topical de-
scription of "philosopher" and "spouse," and then one compares the ele-
ments in each description to determine whether they agree or disagree. If
they agree, they will form an argument which answers the question in the
affirmative; if they disagree, they will form an opposite argument. Thus the
definition of philosopher contains the element virtue, and its combination
with the definition of spouse ("a spouse is a woman received legally as a
companion in life for the sake of producing children") will produce a posi-
tive argument in the context of the observation that it is a virtuous task to
bring forth children. Alternatively, in the form of a syllogism, a philosopher
is a virtuous man; it is virtuous to have children; therefore a philosopher

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[15] See for Agricola's topics Mack 1988 and Mack 1993, 130–167. The first book of *De
inventione* is entirely devoted to a detailed description of the new system and of each topic
individually. The modern edition of *De inventione dialecta* by Mundt (1992) is based on the
1539 edition by Alardus of Amsterdam. A new critical edition by M. van der Poel is in
preparation.

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must have children. A complete argumentation will consist of a string of arguments and hence a string of syllogisms. However, since conviction consists not only in agreement by the intellect but also of emotional assent, argumentations should never be presented in their bare intellectual form, but always in an oratorical manner suited to the time, place and circumstances, in accordance with the practice in ancient philosophy and literature.

In *De inventione dialectica,* Agricola also presents a model for the topical analysis of texts in both poetry and prose, using examples taken from classical literature, and in addition for reducing stylistically elaborated argumentations to their basic syllogistic form (Book 2, chapters 26–27). He also wrote a detailed topical analysis of Cicero's speech *De lege Manilia,* following the method set forth in *De inventione dialectica.*[16] These texts show very clearly how the integration of dialectic and rhetoric works in practice.

During the sixteenth century, *De formando studio* and *De inventione dialectica*, as well several synopses of *De inventione dialectica*, went through many printings in various editions.[17] Although Agricola's system of twenty-four topics and his unique combination of the arts of dialectic and rhetoric did not replace the classical system of treating the two arts separately, his dialectical approach – using texts in both prose and poetry, written in a complex style adapted to the subject, the audience and the author's intentions – was typical in the analysis and production of texts during the entire period of the Renaissance. The emphasis on morals and ethics visible, for instance, in Agricola's choice of commonplace headings in *De formando studio* (virtue–vice, life–death, learning–ignorance, goodwill–hostility) is also a standard common feature of Renaissance school education. Countless commonplace books were produced,[18] as well as textbooks containing dialectical analyses of classical texts focusing on topics and *loci communes* or *theses,*[19] and editions in Latin of *progymnasmata* with contemporary examples of *loci communes*, *theses* and the other preliminary exercises.[20] Human-

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[16] Van der Poel 1997 and 1999.

[17] Mack 1993, 257–279, and Huisman 1985.

[18] Morhof 1747 has a useful discussion of commonplace books, including a survey of important works (*Polyhistor literarius*, Book 1, ch. 21 *De locorum communium scriptoribus*, p. 236–258). The standard modern study on the subject is Moss 1996, see also Moss 2004, chapter 7 (Arguments: Common places).

[19] Morhof 1747 has a useful discussion of this type of textbook, including a survey of important works (*Polyhistor literarius*, Book 3, chapters 8 (*De Excerptis Oratoriis Systematicis*, p. 606–611), 9 (*De excerptis oratoriis enthymematicis*, p. 611–621), and 10 (*De excerptis poeticis*, p. 622–631).

[20] See on this category of school texts Clark 1952, Margolin 1979, Kraus 2005, 167–183.

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ists and scholars working in the humanistic tradition up to the eighteenth century all wrote their essays, letters, orations, declamations, diatribes, and dialogues using the commonplace book and topical invention as standard writing tools.

Much can be learnt about topics and topical invention from the considerable body of scholarship on Renaissance pedagogy, the school curriculums, school textbooks, rhetoric and dialectic, commonplace books, and the literary and philosophical genres practised by Renaissance authors writing in Latin. What is still needed, however, is a study devoted to topical invention which highlights the interaction between theory and practice and focuses on the similarities and differences with ancient and medieval topical invention, and on the developments in both theory and practice as well as their interaction in the course of the Renaissance period.

Erasmus' Encomium matrimonii

To illustrate the interaction between the theory and the practice of topical invention in Northern Humanism around the time of the outbreak of the Protestant Reformation, we will take a brief look at the famous *Declamatio in genere suasorio de laude matrimonii,* or *Encomium matrimonii,* by Erasmus. This is a letter in the *genus deliberativum*, modelled after the ancient practice speech or *declamatio* in the genre of political oratory (*suasoria*), included in Erasmus's treatise on letter writing, *De conscribendis epistolis*, written in the 1490s and published in 1522. This fictional letter is addressed to a young man of noble birth who is the only son and heir and therefore his parents' only hope for the continuation of the family line. He, however, is determined to remain celibate because he wishes to be a good Christian, although rather than truly having a spiritual vocation, he has in fact an affectionate relationship with a beautiful young lady who loves him very much. Erasmus sets out to explain to the young man that his religious scruples against marriage are wrong, and that he should not desire to remain celibate, because a Christian marriage is as good a way of life as one of clerical celibacy, and even better if a true vocation is lacking. He urges the young man not to ignore the love which binds him and his lady friend, and calls upon him to fulfil his obligation towards his family and continue the family line. The purpose of this seemingly innocent set piece was to argue for a positive appraisal of marriage as an institution of the Church and to expose the abuses of clerical celibacy which existed in Erasmus's time. In *De conscribendis epistolis*, this letter is followed by a draft of one against marriage; but when the letter in favour of marriage was published separately in a collection of Erasmus's declamations in 1518, conservative theologians from the universities of Louvain and Paris unchained a polemic against Eras-

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mus's views on marriage and celibacy and accused him of Lutheran her-esy.[21] In order to understand this excessive reaction, we need to take a look at the structure of Erasmus's argumentation and the topics he used to de-velop it.

Although Erasmus had great admiration for Agricola and agreed that stu-dents should be introduced to the study of dialectic,[22] rather than following Agricola's new topical system, he followed the ancient system of rhetorical topics. In his discussion of the theory of the deliberative field in letter writ-ing, he follows in particular Cicero's *De inventione* (Book. 2.156–178) and Quintilian (*Inst*. 3.8.1–48), but adapts the theory to the contemporary cir-cumstances of his case and the purpose of his argumentation. The case of the young man who did not wish to marry belongs to the *genus deliberati-vum*: that is, in antiquity, the genre of speeches on political matters deliv-ered in the various citizens' assemblies. Classical rhetoric distinguishes ex-pediency and honour as the key questions to address in political speeches, and therefore *utilitas* (expediency) and *honestum* (honour) and their oppo-sites are defined as the standard topics for this *genus*. To each of these top-ics, others may be added, as required by the subject of the deliberation and the argumentation developed by the orator. Cicero, for instance, discusses *necessitas* ('necessity') and *affectio* ('affection') as attributes of both expe-diency and honour (*Inv*. 2. 170–176): for "it is necessary for a people under siege to surrender, unless they prefer to die of starvation" (*Inv*. 2.171; tr. Loeb ed.), or "it is an act of baseness to go over to the enemy, but not if done with the purpose which Ulysses had" (*Inv*. 2.176; tr. Loeb ed.). Quin-tilian, on the other hand, states that in deliberations there is no room for ar-guments based on necessity, for necessity implies absence of doubt, and this precludes debate (*Inst*. 3.8.25). Erasmus, for his part, broadens the scope of the *genus deliberativum* on the grounds that letters are written not only to give political advice, but also to ask for something, to recommend some-thing, to reflect on something, to admonish or to console someone (Erasmus 1971, p. 366, lines 2–3). He discerns the following main topics (using the word *rationes*) for this field: *honestum* (honour), *utile* (expediency), *tutum* (safety), *iucundum* (pleasure), *facile* (facility), and *necessitas* (necessity). He then divides each topic following a taxonomic hierarchy, thus producing a series of categories which can function both as headings in a commonplace

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[21] See for the polemic van der Poel 2005.

[22] Erasmus's testimonies on Agricola have been collected and discussed in their context by Akkerman 2012, 183–240. At the beginning of *De ratione studii*, Erasmus says that the principles of dialectic should be learned directly from Aristotle, leaving aside contemporary dialectic taught at the university.

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book and as topics from which arguments may be drawn. For instance, *honestum* is divided into *rectum* (what is right) and *laudabile* (what is praiseworthy); *rectum* into *virtus* (virtue) and *officium* (duty); *virtus* into *prudentia* (prudence)*, iustitia* (justice)*, fortitudo* (fortitude), and *temperantia* (temperance); *prudentia* into *intelligentia* (understanding), *memoria* (recollection), and *providentia* (foresight), and so on.[23] Erasmus discusses the taxonomy of *honestum* in great detail and of *utilitas* quite briefly, but does not discuss the four other main topics or *rationes*. It is very clear that Erasmus, while following his classical models closely, has attuned the topics to the contemporary social, historical and even religious context, and to his own programme of Christian humanism. In sum, we observe that Erasmus's theory of the topics reflects the historical context and the practical purposes for which he teaches them.

In the model letter on the case of the young man who wished not to marry, Erasmus uses three main topics, *honestum, iucundum* and *utile-necessarium*.[24] The treatment of the topic *honestum* takes up the greater part of the argumentation (p. 402–420), consisting mainly of a general theological argument that presents scores of *auctoritates* against the view held by conservative theologians that celibacy is inherently better than marriage. Erasmus positions his discussion of *honestum* safely within the framework of the fictional case at hand by addressing the young man directly (e.g. "homo homini loquor," p. 418, line 12); but its substance constitutes an *amplificatio dubiae rei* or *thesis*, which gives this part of the letter the appearance of a brief essay on moral theology. The next topic, *iucundum*, is treated in far less detail (p. 420, line 19 to p. 425, line 16) and is presented in the form of an *amplificatio certae rei,* or commonplace on the joy of love and companionship. This section of the letter is written in a personal style and is intended to persuade the young man emotionally rather than rationally, because Erasmus wishes him not only to agree with him intellectually, but also to change his personal conviction about marriage and accordingly to make a different choice for his life. In the last part of the letter, Erasmus combines the topics *utile* and *necessarium* in order to convince the young man, by means of a score of historical examples, that he should prefer marriage to celibacy in view of his duty to secure his family line (p. 425, line 16 – 428, line 4). This section is written in a very lively and personal style, clearly

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[23] Erasmus 1971, p. 366, line 1 – p. 367, line 2. The entire section on the topics of deliberative letter writing is at pp. 365–370.

[24] This paragraph is based entirely on van der Poel 2000, where the argumentation is discussed in more detail than here. The text used is Erasmus 1971, p. 401, line 19 – p. 428, line 24.

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intended to evoke both an intellectual and an emotional response from the addressee. It also brings the main argument of the letter, which for the greater part had been firmly on the level of a general question, back to the level of the particular case at hand.

In *De conscribendis epistolis*, the case of the young man who wishes to remain celibate is followed by the contrary case of a young man who wishes to marry for the wrong reasons. The arguments for persuading this young man to choose celibacy are presented in outline only, and they consist for a substantial part of the usual misogynistic ideas found in the classical poets and the Church Fathers (p. 430, line 4 to 432, line 14). Thus Erasmus places his discussion of marriage vs celibacy accurately within the field of dialectical reasoning pro and con, while the two fictional cases make it clear that he is not interested in an academic discussion of Christian marriage among theologians, but is setting out to stimulate lay people to develop their own judgment about the matter. The university theologians who accused him thus either failed to understand Erasmus's position or categorically rejected it and therefore accused him of heresy.

This example shows well that in both theory and practice, Erasmus adapts Cicero's and Quintilian's topics for deliberative oratory to the context of his time and the purpose of his writing. A series of similar case studies from different times and intellectual contexts might reveal changes in the uses of topics capable of being interpreted in the light of contemporary developments in society. The *Declamation in Praise of Marriage* is one of a series of writings by means of which Erasmus was attempting to stimulate debate on religious matters against a background of increasing intolerance due to the beginning of Lutheranism. By the middle of the sixteenth century the Church had issued, in response to the Protestant movement, clear statements of its official teachings in disputed issues, as well as clear pronouncements about what it regarded as Protestant heresies. From that time onwards, "open" debates directly involving lay people, such as Erasmus had initiated by publishing his *Declamation on the praise of marriage*, had become virtually impossible. It would be interesting to explore whether this change of intellectual climate had its effect on the theory and practice of topics in rhetorical texts. In particular, it would be worthwhile to investigate whether there are any developments in the occurrences of *loci communes* and their uses. A study of the use of topics and *loci communes* will constitute a fundamental contribution to our knowledge of the intellectual culture of the Renaissance, because it will be based entirely on the study of a corpus of source texts dating from the period, be analysed and interpreted by using the very theory and method by which they were composed.

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