

Age Ain't Nuthin' But A Number Except When It Isn't: Cicero and the Problem of Youth in the Philippics

Among the many tensions found in Cicero's political philosophy – for example, between *civitas* and *patria*, action and inaction, monarchy and republicanism – one of the most important, and often overlooked, is the tension between old and young; in particular, the question of whether a young man could be a statesman. Nowhere is this tension more visual, or more vital, than in the eight months between the delivery of the *First Philippic* and the Battle of Mutina. Cicero's use of age- and generational-specific terms both to attack Antony and praise Octavian provides a useful tool for examining Cicero's political philosophy of this period as well as his strategy of self-promotion. In this paper I examine Cicero's use of generational conflict as a key component of the dual purposes of the *Philippics*: to destroy Antony while simultaneously inciting a personal political renaissance. I conclude with a few reflections on how generational conflict highlights Cicero's political pragmatism and his willingness to ignore societal or legal taboos in order to support the Roman *res publica*.

Generational conflict is a hallmark of both the *Philippics* and his correspondence between November 44-April 43 as Cicero presents his conflict with Antony in the *Philippics* as a conflict between an elder statesman and a young ruffian. This conflict is framed by the construct of the traditional virtues associated with senescence and adolescence. Whereas in *De Re Publica*, age seemed to play no role, as it was virtue and virtue alone that made one a statesmen, in *De Senectute*, written shortly before the publication of the *First Philippic*, Cicero states unequivocally that age is a key component to statesmanship (e.g. *Sen.* 7, 17-18, 20, 29; cf. *Off.* 1.76; Zarecki 2014: 137-9). A major theme introduced in *De Senectute* that would recur during 44-43 BCE is that young men are very dangerous, for they are in possession of *temeritas*, a trait which is countered by the *prudentia* of old men (*Sen.* 20; cf. *Rep.* 1.67). Despite Powell's (1988:

4) claim that *De Senectute* is to be read chiefly as a ‘document of Roman humanism’, its precepts concerning age become weaponized in very real fashion in the *Philippics*. Antony is constantly disparaged either as youth, for actions during his youth, or for youthful actions taken as an adult that were considered shameful for adults let alone consuls – nowhere more vigorously than the *Second Philippic* (esp. 44-7, 52) – while Cicero’s self-praise centers on his superior statesmanship as a *senex* (e.g. *Phil.* 2.118).

Cicero’s support of the youthful Octavian, however, was a serious difficulty in his attempt to raise himself back to a position of political necessity. Cicero managed to rationalize this seemingly contradictory stance by arguing that the normative characteristics of old men need not be particular only to chronological elders, thereby returning to a position that he had promoted a decade earlier in *De Re Publica* (e.g. Atkins 2013, 64-79). Cicero tempered his vitriol over Antony’s youth by highlighting Octavian’s senescent virtues, especially in *Phil.* 3, virtues which were all the more remarkable because they resided in a youth not far removed from assuming the *toga virilis*. Antony, however, remained the petulant child, incapable of acts of legitimate and serious statesmanship. Octavian’s extreme youth was never far from Cicero’s mind, but while Octavian nominally submitted to Cicero’s authority and showed deference to the wishes of the Senate, he was praised for virtues which belonged properly to elder statesman (e.g. *Phil.* 3.15, 5.42-8). As soon as he broke with Cicero, however, Octavian reverted to being merely a *puer*, and his sudden about-face following Mutina was attributed to his age, not any failure on the part of Cicero or the Senate to recognize Octavian’s true intentions (*Att.* 14.12.2, 15.2.2; *ad Brut.* 1.10.3-4).

This examination of Cicero’s use of generational conflict in the *Philippics* helps us to better grasp the complexity of Cicero’s thought and his reactions to current events. Though it

represents a secondary focus of Cicero's political philosophy of the period, and may seem at first glance seem to be opportunistic politics as opposed to political philosophy, Cicero's use of generational conflict is a salient example of Cicero's political pragmatism and a demonstration of his willingness to break legal and social taboos in order to preserve his version of the Republic.

Bibliography

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