

Senex and the City
Reassessing the De Senectute

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I hereby certify that this dissertation, which is approximately 13,000 words in length, has been composed by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree. This project was conducted by me at the University of St Andrews from June 2007 to September 2007 towards fulfilment of the requirements of the University of St Andrews for the degree of Mlitt. under the supervision of Greg Woolf. In submitting this dissertation to the University of St Andrews, I understand that I am giving permission for it to be made available for use in accordance with the regulations of the University Library for the time being in force, subject to any copyright vested in the work not affected thereby. I also understand that a copy of the work may be made and supplied to any bona fide library or research worker. Date: August 31st, 2007 signature of candidate:

To Greg Woolf, my supervisor

**And Jill Harries, for her excellent advice and words of wisdom
and Michael Ng, for his assistance and suggestion of the perfect title.**

I. Introduction

De Senectute¹ has often been regarded as a pleasant² and charming³ disquisition on the twilight years of life, and little more than that, worthy only of serious scholarly consideration when the possibility of mining it for information arises⁴. The dialogue is a victim of its own success; it is easy to be beguiled by its charm and its affected simplicity. This is a mistake as it underestimates Cicero's not insignificant rhetorical skill and ignores the context of De Senectute's creation. Even though it is not thematically interesting to modern scholars as some of Cicero's more political works, it was written during one of the great turning points in Roman history- and one, more over, that was of deep and direct consequence to Cicero personally. Cicero was 62 when he wrote the De Senectute, putting him, by Roman standards⁵ at the very threshold of old age. His interest in the subject of the role of old men in society is not surprising, all things considered, nor is the particular focus on the role of elder statesmen. Yet the text's historical context suggests that there was far more at stake than simple leisured retirement. The position of both Cicero and any hypothetical elder statesmen in Roman political life was up for question under the new regime and its aftermath. It is curious that Cicero bypassed the position of the elder statesmen in the new world order entirely, instead setting his dialogue during the idealized and very republican past⁶, and putting his words into the mouth of a man who epitomized republican virtue⁷.

This disconnect suggests that there is more here than a simple text on aging gracefully. That Cicero's treatise on the pleasures of old age would so focus on a vision of the world that no

¹ All quotations are taken from the Loeb Classical Library translation of the text unless otherwise stated.

² Falconer (1938, p. v) Preface to the Loeb translation of De Senectute.

³ Powell (1988, p. 4)

⁴ See for example Astin (1978, Appendix 1), Astin (1976, Chapter 1), Reay (2005, p. 3 footnotes)

⁵ Powell (1988 p. 2), Rawson (1975, p. 209)

⁶ Rawson (1975, p. 148, 246) According to Rawson, the dialogue is set in what was to Cicero a golden age.

⁷ Astin (1978, p. 289) "Above all he could appear – or be presented- as an idealized public figure, as a wise counsellor, as one of the outstanding senators of the Roman Republic."

longer existed is intriguing, and points to several different lines of inquiry. If we imagine the text in terms of geology, it is possible to imagine its layers as strata, each level informing the next, but remaining distinct. The uppermost stratum would then consist of Cicero's positioning of the piece in the introduction, which contains an explanation of the motive behind and the intent of the writing of De Senectute. Cicero crafts the introduction in the form of personal correspondence, and by doing so, his presence is projected into the narrative as the narrator, shaping the story while not being an explicit part of it.

Our second stratum might then consist of the representation of Cato, who is set up as a role model in consequence of his status as the respected elder statesman. This is mirrored in a third stratum, in which Quintus Fabius Maximus is presented as Cato's role model. Essentially, Cicero crafts a vision of Cato crafting his own vision of even more distant figures, pushing the discourse beyond a simple appeal to authority and beginning to hint at the idea of a timeless, natural cycle. There is always symmetry between how Cato (and therefore Cicero) and his role models define a good old age. Yet there is a conflict between what is implied by the introduction, with its reminders of contemporary events⁸, and the text's stated agenda.

The most obvious starting point for this is in the depiction of Cato himself, and the interplay between the historical figure, the legend he himself helped craft, and Cicero's own self-fashioning. For example, Cicero depicts Cato as reveling in the status accorded to him by his position, eminence, and age. Cato then similarly depicts other, earlier, old men doing the same. Yet Cicero was denied the very status he praises as the best of things, thanks to the contemporary events alluded to in the introduction⁹. This grants the entire discussion an air of poignancy, and ensures that the dialogue's treatment of possible substitutes is granted all that much more weight.

⁸ De Senectute: I:1 "And yet I have an idea that you are at times stirred to the heart by the same circumstances as myself. To console you for these is a more serious matter, and must be put off to another time." Shuckburgh translation, (1909)

⁹ Powell (1988, p. 94).

II. Circumstances

A precise date for the composition of the text has remained elusive, but it is possible to narrow it down. De Senectute was written during the same period as many of Cicero's philosophical writings. The text is mentioned in a letter to Atticus¹⁰ in May of 44. It was written before De Divinatione, for it is mentioned in that text, and De Divinatione contains references that make it clear that it was written after Caesar's assassination.¹¹ It seems likely that it was written in either late 45 or early 44 BC. Powell argued that certain references in De Divinatione might imply a temporary halt in Cicero's philosophical writings, due to a brief return to public life¹² after the assassination. Additionally, De Senectute displays a kind of regretful nostalgia that would be out of place after the death of the dictator¹³. For these reasons, the date of composition is usually assumed to be in the first quarter of 44¹⁴, and there does not seem to be any compelling reason to dispute that. Both methods place the composition of De Senectute squarely amidst the Republic's death throes, and troubled times for Cicero. Cicero's allusion to troubling circumstances is vague; whether he had something specific in mind or was referring to contemporary events in general is something lost to history. Arguably, the vagueness indicates that it was either something so recent as to need no explanation or it was referring to the general state of events- also something that would be implicitly understood. Regardless, a general understanding of events will suffice.

In 46 BC, Caesar finally overcame the last of the Republican forces, which led to Cato the Younger's famous suicide¹⁵. While Caesar celebrated his triumphs and solidified his power¹⁶,

¹⁰ Ad Atticum: XIV:21

¹¹ De Divinatione: II:23 etc.

¹² Powell (1988, p. 267)

¹³ Powell (1988, p. 268) and Rawson (1975, p. 246)

¹⁴ Powell (1988, p. 267), Mackendrick and Singh (1989, p. 205), Rawson (1975, p. 246), Falconer (1923, p. 4) The last is from the Loeb Classical Library's translators introduction

¹⁵ Goar (1987, p. 1)

Cicero wrote a 'laudatory memoir' for Cato, which apparently provoked an *Anticato* pamphlet from Caesar.¹⁷ In February of 44, Caesar was crowned dictator for life¹⁸ and shortly thereafter assassinated. Cicero in part turned to writing as an outlet for political commentary¹⁹ but Cicero's troubles were not entirely political. In this same period, he had a falling out with his brother²⁰, his long marriage to Terentia fell to pieces²¹ and then his daughter died²². The last of these drove Cicero to withdraw to his house in Astura, where he shunned company.²³ Instead, he found consolation in the reading and writing of philosophy²⁴. From this came one of the great periods of his philosophic writing. It seems unlikely that he might have been referring to his tumultuous personal life, as the text was not- for all its stylistic posturing in the introduction- a letter to Atticus.

III. Overview and Summary of De Senectute

As an overview and summary of the text will prove a useful anchor for further discussion, one has been included here. The text is primarily composed of six relatively distinct parts: the dedication, the in-dialogue introduction, and a section each on the topics of active employment, feebleness, pleasure, and death. In the dedication of the De Senectute, Cicero states that his aim in writing it was to offer Atticus (and Cicero himself) a small comfort in dark times and a consolation for the deprivations and deprecations of age²⁵. In addition to describing the circumstances and purposes that propelled him to write De Senectute, the dedication serves as an

¹⁶ Le Glay (1996, p. 143)

¹⁷ Rawson (1975, pp. 212-213), Goar (1987, pp. 15-16), Steel (2005, pp. 33-34)

¹⁸ Le Glay (1996, p. 143)

¹⁹ Steel (2005, p. 34)

²⁰ Rawson (1975, p. 222), although things did get better.

²¹ Rawson (1975, p. 222)

²² Rawson (1975, p. 225)

²³ Rawson (1975, p. 225)

²⁴ Rawson (1975, p. 226), Dorey (1964, See A.E. Douglas, pp. 135-136)

²⁵ De Senectute: I:1-3

introduction as Cicero also explains his choice of characters and setting. He defends his decision to not use a mythic figure by saying that his arguments will carry more weight coming from the ‘venerable Marcus Cato’ than from a myth. Before finally plunging into the dialogue proper, he hints that he has taken certain liberties in his depiction of Cato.

This introduction is paralleled in the main body of the text by an “internal” introduction. In the external introduction, Cicero sets up the dialogue and in the internal introduction, Cato²⁶ does the same, although in greater detail. The dialogue begins as Cicero said it would: Scipio marvels at the ease with which Cato bears his old age. The old man quickly plays down the praise, and implies that his attitude is nothing special - he even goes so far as to intimate that only idiots treat old age differently.

“...to those who seek all good from themselves nothing can seem evil that the laws of nature inevitably impose. [...] In fact, no lapse of time, however long, once it had slipped away, could solace or soothe a foolish old age [...] I am wise because I follow Nature as the best of guides²⁷ ...”

Laelius prevails upon the old man to enlighten them and Cato finally relents. He explains that it is a man’s character that deserves the credit or blame for whether old age is joyous or tiresome²⁸ and then spends an entire chapter (chapter four) setting up Quintus Fabius Maximus as his role model. He then provides a few more examples of good old age, for purposes illustration; the Roman examples tend to show active involvement in public life, while the Greek examples concern passive scholarly pursuits²⁹. Cato concludes his introduction by listing the four complaints against old age: a) it forces retirement from active employments; b) it is enfeebling; c) it leads to the loss of physical pleasures; and d) it is overshadowed by death. These make up the other four parts of the dialogue, which are dealt with in order.

²⁶ Mentions of ‘Cato’ in this summary should be understood as Cicero’s-dialogue-version-of-Cato. It is a phrase that is too ungainly to use.

²⁷ De Senectute: II:5

²⁸ De Senectute: III:7

²⁹ Powell (1988, p. 130)

The issue of active employments is dealt with in chapters six and seven. Cato argues that the place of the old man is the place of the wise elder statesman, and dismisses senility, disrespect, and weakness from consideration.³⁰ He then segues into a discussion of staying mentally acute through intellectual stimulation³¹. By doing so, he is led into the topic of enfeeblement, which does include an argument for engaging in scholarly pursuits. The argument for active employments overlaps with the argument about enfeeblement because the latter is often the given cause for lack of the former. In spite of the overlap, they are not part of a single argument. The active employments section is about the ability and the duty for the old man to remain active and the enfeeblement discussion is about the changes wrought by a new stage of life.

This change of life is dealt with in the next four chapter (seven through eleven), specifically through a discussion of both mental and physical enfeeblement. This section repeatedly stresses that old age does not bring loss (i.e. enfeeblement and disrespect), but change. The old man that lacks the strength to engage in oratorical and physical contests can and should turn to instruction³². This includes instructing the youth, advising the senate (*et al*), and engaging in literary pursuits that will enlighten later generations³³. A main point is that mental acuity replaces and even surpasses physical might. Yet physical infirmity is still addressed. It is argued that physical infirmity can strike at any time of life³⁴, and that it may be possible to ward this off through keeping physically active and a restrained diet.³⁵ As a corollary to this, it is argued that feebleness can be the product of little self-control and vice³⁶. The last component to this argument

³⁰ “It is not by muscle, speed, or physical dexterity that great things are achieved, but by reflection, force of character and judgement; in these qualities old age is usually not only not poorer, but is even richer.” De Senectute: VI:17

³¹ e.g. De Senectute: VIII:22 “Old men retain their mental faculties, provided their interest and application continue...”. See also VIII:21, VIII:26 (which mentions Cato’s own scholarly pursuits).

³² De Senectute: IX:29. “And although one cannot himself engage in oratory, still, he may be able to give instruction to a Scipio or Laelius!”

³³ See De Senectute: XI:38, in which Cato describes himself as taking up these activities.

³⁴ De Senectute: XI:35

³⁵ De Senectute: XI:36

³⁶ De Senectute: XI:35

is acceptance. Old age (and the loss of physical strength that accompanies it), he argues, is just another stage of life:

“Life’s race-course is fixed; Nature has but only a single path and that path is run but once, and to each stage of existence has been allotted its own appropriate quality...”³⁷

And therefore should be no more mourned than loss of childishness:

“...do not bewail it when it is gone, unless, forsooth, you believe that youth must lament the loss of infancy...”³⁸

A quiet private life of literary pursuits is represented as an acceptable alternative to active involvement, if active involvement is made impossible³⁹. Cato argues that, whatever they do, old men should work for posterity; he speaks of great poets, of philosophers, of mentors, and statesmen⁴⁰- every active employment he recommends in this section benefits future generations.

The section pleasure begins in chapter twelve, and it continues until chapter nineteen. The argument is in two halves; in the first half, the loss of sensual pleasure is dismissed as a concern. As the root of so much evil⁴¹, no sane man could miss it. The second half concerns the superiority of non-sensual and more virtuous delights. The joys of good conversation, for example, are lauded by saying that a good conversation far surpasses the pleasure of anything else at banquets. Chapter thirteen contains a few unsubtle digs at Epicureanism⁴², although it is not mentioned it by name.

Cato’s own delights are discussed, which brings the old man around to the topic of the joys of agriculture (chapters sixteen and seventeen). These are beautiful – almost poetic—

³⁷ De Senectute: X:33

³⁸ *ibid.*

³⁹ De Senectute: XI:38. Cato implies that he is referring to physical infirmity.

⁴⁰ De Senectute: XI:38

⁴¹ De Senectute: XII:39-40, “There is no criminal purpose and no evil deed which the lust for pleasure will not drive men to undertake. Indeed, rape, adultery, and every like offence are set in motion by the enticements of pleasure and by nothing else...”

⁴² Powell (1988, p. 189). De Senectute XIII: 43 “I have heard from my elders [...] that there was a man who professed himself “wise” and used to say that everything we do should be judged by the standard of pleasure...”

passages, and they artfully allow the old man to seemingly digress onto a topic close to his heart, as old men are famously wont to do.⁴³ He speaks of farming as the ideal life⁴⁴: it is productive, delightful, and benefits the human race⁴⁵. He goes on in this vein for a time, and then (amusingly) remarks, “But, lest I wander from my subject, I return to the farmers⁴⁶.” Yet at this point he does at least return to the subject of old age. He speaks of famous (old) Roman farmers, and then begins to wax poetic about the joys of farm life- although he does mention that it is ideal for the health and comfort of an old man. Finally, Cato starts to come to the end of his refutation that old age is the worse for the loss of sensual pleasure. He argues that the crowning glory of old age is influence and that all the wonders of old age he described only apply to those who have lived well and virtuously.

“But, it will be said, old men are fretful, fidgety, ill-tempered, and disagreeable. If you come to that, they are also avaricious. But these are faults of character, not of the time of life.”⁴⁷

The last section of the dialogue deals with the complaint that old age is overshadowed by death. It is comprised of four chapters: nineteen through twenty-three. Much of these chapters are devoted to explaining why there is nothing to fear from death: first, it is inevitable and can strike at any time of life⁴⁸, second, it is not the length of a life that matters, but how it is lived⁴⁹, and third, old age is the natural time to die⁵⁰. Cato also argues that one’s impending death should not beget anxiety, since such a thing is foolish:

“But, you may say, the young man hopes that he will live for a long time and this hope the old man cannot have. Such a hope is not wise, for what is more unwise than to mistake uncertainty for certainty, falsehood for truth? They say, also, that the old man has nothing even to hope for. Yet he is in better case than the young man, since what the latter merely hopes for, the former has already attained; the one wishes to live long, the other already has lived long.”⁵¹

⁴³ De Senectute: XVI:55 “...my farmer’s zeal has carried me away; besides, old age is inclined to talk too much...”

⁴⁴ De Senectute: XV:51

⁴⁵ De Senectute: XV:51-53, XVI:56

⁴⁶ De Senectute: XVI:56

⁴⁷ De Senectute: XVIII:65

⁴⁸ De Senectute: XIX: 67-68

⁴⁹ De Senectute: XIX:69

⁵⁰ De Senectute: XX:72

⁵¹ De Senectute: XIX:68

The immortality of the soul is also discussed. If the soul does not live on, Cato argues, death will be nothing and should not be feared. If it does, than death must be a pleasant liberty, and involve a reunion with lost loved ones, and thus should be looked forward to⁵². Cato remarks:

“People think that I have bravely borne my loss- not that I bore it with an untroubled heart, but I found constant solace in the thought that our separation would not be long⁵³.”

Cato then draws the dialogue to a close, commenting that now Scipio and Laelius understand why old age sits lightly on him, they may yet be able to emulate him.

IV. Framework

The interplay between the strata has as its focal point the character of Cato the Elder, who dominates the dialogue to such an extent that it reads as a monologue. This creates something of a challenge, as it is impossible to address any other commentary that might be present without first addressing the figure of Cato the Elder. There is no way to distinguish where the characterization of Cato ends and the dialogue’s arguments begin, which is why it is important to examine how he was characterized and why the dialogue was put in his mouth.

Cicero went to pains to make the dialogue’s characters and setting credible- to evoke what Powell described as a ‘Catonian effect’. This was achieved through carefully choosing the literary references Cato makes in the dialogue⁵⁴ and having Cato quote from the real Cato’s own works⁵⁵, using language with somewhat ‘old-timey’ associations⁵⁶, and finally, having Cato fall into the quite age-appropriate habit of long digressions concerning the past and his personal

⁵² De Senectute: XXI, XXII

⁵³ De Senectute: XXIII:84

⁵⁴ Powell (1988, p. 19)

⁵⁵ Rawson, (1972, p. 40)

⁵⁶ Powell (1988, p. 21)

interests⁵⁷. Even Robert Jones concedes that Cicero made the effort to properly characterize his subjects.⁵⁸ Yet we are reminded in the introduction that Cicero has taken certain liberties⁵⁹ with Cato, namely in making the old man more eloquent and perhaps learned. However, Cicero does not break with the traditions concerning Cato as much as he plays them off each other⁶⁰ as necessary; this can be seen in the pains Cicero takes to offer a plausible, if not entirely credible, reason for the discrepancy between Cicero's Cato, who exhibits a more sophisticated (and educated) style, and the works of the historical Cato,⁶¹ although by doing so he also hints that he has used Cato as he saw fit. This admission has led more than one scholar down the path of trying to distill the historical Cato from the dialogue's character. Robert Epes Jones provides an excellent example of this approach:

*"[A]ll those comments put into Cato's mouth by Cicero which denote an enthusiasm for Greek literature and philosophy-and there are many of them -are obviously inappropriate. In these instances Cicero is expressing his own views in the mouth of Cato."*⁶²

The opposite approach would be to suggest that the De Senectute may be an adaptation of some other text and that, therefore, the character of Cato is irrelevant. There is some question as to the extent Cicero may have been influenced by Greek philosophers in the writing of the dialogue. This is not a terribly large concern, for two reasons. The first is that Cicero was above all else an "eclectic" philosopher⁶³. He would pick and choose from this and that as suited his primary aim⁶⁴. It is therefore less likely that the dialogue is solely a wholesale adaptation/translation of some other (Greek) text. Furthermore, as Schmidt argues, Cicero was far

⁵⁷ De Senectute: IV:10-12 XV- XVI:51-56, (esp. 55:"Old age is naturally inclined to talk too much").

⁵⁸ Jones (1939, p. 308) "Even in comparatively unimportant details Cicero shows, in every dialogue, an attempt to give a realistic characterisation,"

⁵⁹ De Senectute: I:1-3

⁶⁰ Powell (1988, p. 20)

⁶¹ De Senectute: I:3, VIII:26 ("...with the result that I have acquired first-hand the information which you see me using in this discussion by way of illustration.")

⁶² Jones (1939, p321)

⁶³ Striker (1995, p. 55)

⁶⁴ Dorey (1965, p. 135) A.E. Douglas' chapter.

from opposed to giving philosophical credit where credit was due⁶⁵. In his more philosophic works, such a thing would be necessary, if they were truly to work as guides to introduce the reader to philosophy⁶⁶. In the case of Cicero's works concerning applied philosophy/ethics, such as the De Senectute, the practice of cherry picking from a variety of philosophies and philosophers seems to prevail, although Stoicism's influence is very visible in the text.⁶⁷ In comparison with earlier philosophical works concerning old age, Powell finds that De Senectute echoes them only in the most generic ways (as they echoed each other)⁶⁸. The mention of the Tithonus in the introduction need not imply that De Senectute is overly indebted to it. It is used as an example against which Cicero compares his own text, while explaining his use of Cato. Furthermore, the title of the Tithonus implies that it may have taken a different tack; Tithonus is better known as an example of an uncomfortable and unpleasant old age.⁶⁹

Cicero says that he chose Cato (and not some mythological figure) to voice his arguments because his words would carry more weight coming from the 'venerable Marcus Cato.'⁷⁰ Modern scholarship suggests that Cato was an ideal choice because of his long and successful life and because Cicero identified with or idealized him.⁷¹ Accepting this as the end of it means assuming that there is a clear dividing line between the dialogue's speaker and Cato, handy literary device. Any point Cicero wishes to make must be filtered through the character he has chosen; there will never be a clear and easy way to differentiate between the two. Cato dominates the text to such an extent that it is unlikely that his character is nothing more than a mouthpiece for Cicero with a few Catonian touches. Instead of attempting to separate the two, it is far more revealing to examine how Cato was portrayed in the dialogue and how the text's message was affected by his

⁶⁵ Schmidt (1978, p. 117)

⁶⁶ Striker (1995, p. 57). Schmidt (1978, p. 118)

⁶⁷ Powell (1988, pp. 269-272).

⁶⁸ *ibid.*

⁶⁹ Powell (1988, p. 26)

⁷⁰ De Senectute: I:1-3

⁷¹ cf. Astin (1978 pg. 298-299), Mackendrick and Singh (1989, pg. 210), Powell (1988, pg. 17), et cetera.

presence. Cato's portrayal rests on three thematic pillars: agricultural imagery, context, and association; intellectual and literary pursuits; and the role of the Grand Old Man. An examination of these thematic pillars is the key to a better understanding of the triangular relation between the author, the subject, and his audience, and thereby the text itself.

V. Agriculture

The dramatic setting of the dialogue sets the tone for the characterization of Cato. It is usually understood as being set in 150 BC, based primarily on the mention in the dialogue of the "present" consuls: Titus Flamininus and Manius Acilius⁷², and that Cato gives his age as 84⁷³. It is an era known to be dear to Cicero's heart⁷⁴- in his mind, a kind of golden age⁷⁵ - and Cato, Scipio and Laelius seemed to him to embody its best qualities.⁷⁶ Regardless, the exact year is not as important to the dialogue as the idea of the past. Extensive passages and references to agriculture are used to build this notion of the past. The dialogue itself references the notion of an idealized agricultural past when Cato invokes the farmers (and model men) of past generations,⁷⁷ such as Cincinnatus at his plough, and Curius at his farm. It praises the farming life as ideal explicitly:

"...it seems to me, in the highest degree suited to the life of the wise man."⁷⁸

But the ideal Roman citizen-farmer was a thing of the past, even in Cato's day,⁷⁹ more part of what today might be called national mythology. Brendon Reay argues that Cato, *homo novus*, fashioned an identity around showing himself to be more heir by his virtue to the distinguished

⁷² De Senectute: V:14. Powell (1988, pp. 16, 132)

⁷³ De Senectute: X:32. See Astin (1978, p.1) as to the ways Cato's birth-year has been figured.

⁷⁴ Rawson (1975, p. 246)

⁷⁵ Rawson (1975, p.148)

⁷⁶ Powell (1988, p. 17), Astin (1967, p. 9)

⁷⁷ De Senectute: XVI:56

⁷⁸ De Senectute: XV:51

⁷⁹ Reay (2005, p. 331)

Romans of the past than their actual descendants were heir by blood⁸⁰. Concerning that effort in *De Agricultura*, Reay writes,

“Cato puts forward himself and his life in imitation of other, more ancient Roman farmer-statesmen and their lives, men whose hands-on labor in their fields was both the source and conspicuous proof of their frugality, austerity, and industry, and whose record of service to the *res publica* was unequivocally distinguished—men like Manius Curius Dentatus...⁸¹”

Cicero (and his contemporaries) had access to many of Cato’s works and speeches, including *De Agricultura*, and it seems that Cato’s self-fashioning would have had significant influence over his legend. The dialogue picks up on this legend and treats Cato as one of the great and virtuous Romans of the past, associating him, much as he himself did, with the farm: Cato speaks in the dialogue of those virtuous citizen-farmers, but he is also portrayed as one of them. Both Cato and the idealized past evoke agricultural imagery and themes.

Much of this agricultural evocation is done in the section of the dialogue that deals with pleasure; Cato speaks of the sheer joy he finds in the growth of things⁸², the visual pleasures of fields and farms⁸³, and the delights of their produce⁸⁴. Simple pleasures, but also the best of pleasures:

“I am inclined to think that no life can be happier than that of the farmer, not merely from the standpoint of the duty performed, which benefits the entire human race, but also because of its charm already mentioned, and the plenty and abundance it gives of everything that tends to the nurture of man and even to the worship of the gods; and since certain people delight in these material joys, I have said this that I may now make my peace with pleasure⁸⁵.”

Yet for their length, these chapters do not especially explicitly further the argument about pleasure. As an ‘appropriately Catonian⁸⁶’ topic, though, it provides a way to bring up Cato’s *On*

⁸⁰ Reay (2005 pp. 333-4)

⁸¹ *ibid.*

⁸² *De Senectute*: XV:51

⁸³ *De Senectute*: XV:53

⁸⁴ *ibid.*

⁸⁵ *De Senectute*: XVI:56

⁸⁶ A phrase borrowed from Powell (1988, p. 21)

Farming and fit in a few more literary references⁸⁷ (Homer and Hesiod, to be precise), strengthening the portrayal of Cato as engaged in literary pursuits. It also heightens the characterization of the old man- as the dialogue points out, old men are inclined to talk too much about subjects near and dear to their hearts.

“...my farmer’s zeal has carried me away; besides, old age is inclined to talk too much...”

Yet, the agriculture theme is not merely a gloss meant to make the dialogue seem a little more Catonian. Instead, while it may be used to put forth certain ideas in the dialogue, it also fundamentally shapes those ideas. This is true throughout the text and not just in the pleasure section. There are numerous instances throughout the dialogue in which the rhetoric takes on an agricultural flair. A few examples:

Speaking of old age as natural-

“And yet there had to be something final, and- as in the case of orchard fruits and crops of grain in the process of ripening which comes with time- something shriveled, as it were, and prone to fall⁸⁸.”

Speaking of influence-

“Now the fruit of old age, as I have often said, is the memory of abundant blessings previously acquired.⁸⁹”

Speaking of appreciating each age in its time-

“...one has no more cause to grieve than the farmers have that the pleasant springtime has passed and that summer and autumn have come. For the spring typifies youth and gives promise of future fruits; while the other seasons are designed for gathering in those fruits and storing them away⁹⁰.”

The dialogue’s beautiful and extensive agricultural imagery⁹¹ strengthens the ‘seasons of life’ theme that runs through the dialogue, albeit in the form of a great many agricultural comparisons and metaphors,⁹² as above. Yet the framing of so many discussions of otherwise Stoic character within agricultural motifs does not seem accidental. The agricultural theme easily lends itself to

⁸⁷ De Senectute: XV:54

⁸⁸ De Senectute: II:5

⁸⁹ De Senectute: XIX:71

⁹⁰ De Senectute: XIX:70

⁹¹ such as De Senectute XV:53, speaking of grapevines, “Then as it creeps on, spreading itself in intricate and wild profusion, the dresser’s art prunes it with the knife and prevents it growing a forest of shoots and expanding to excess in every direction.” Shuckburgh translation, (1909)

⁹² See the examples above. As well as De Senectute: VI:20-21, the harvest time of life, etc.

discussions of the seasons of life (though not an unique comparison, certainly), as well as to arguments for following Nature's course.

"I am wise because I follow Nature as the best of guides⁹³," Cato says very early in the dialogue. According to Brad Inwood, a central Stoic tenet was that:

"By contemplating Nature, the world, one learns the set of true principles which man is to live by; life in accordance with this will also be life in consistency with oneself...⁹⁴"

Through this, it is possible to discern how these agriculture-related quotations reflect the Stoic nature⁹⁵ of some of the dialogue's arguments. This would seem to support the idea that agricultural theme and other Catonian touches are merely ways to excuse the un-Catonian nature of the dialogue. However, there is another Cato who must be taken into account: Cato the Younger, famous for both his Stoicism⁹⁶ and his death⁹⁷, which was still a relatively recent event at the time of De Senectute's composition. Cato the Younger took great pride in his famous ancestor and consciously identified with him⁹⁸ and the debate over his historical legacy (which Cicero had no small part in creating⁹⁹) was still in recent memory (if not ongoing) at the time De Senectute was written¹⁰⁰. As a result, it does not seem surprising that Stoic sentiments would be put in Cato the Elder's mouth to parallel his great-grandson's devotion to Stoicism. Arguably, this is an instance of reverse characterization: a well-known trait of a contemporary descendent applied to the ancestor in order to strengthen the image of him through retroactive association.

The agricultural and stoical elements are too intertwined to discern which is primary. The latter is reminiscent of Cato the Elder and the ideal past, and the former is the philosophical foundation of many points and is reminiscent of Cato the Younger. It is difficult to tell which was

⁹³ De Senectute: II:5

⁹⁴ Inwood (1985, p. 109)

⁹⁵ Powell (1988, pp. 108, 121, 205-206, 243) for relevant comparisons to Stoicism. Jones (1939, p. 312): "Certain views are also expressed in the dialogue, which may be paralleled by Stoic tenets"

⁹⁶ Goar (1987 p. 14), Rawson (1985, p. 95)

⁹⁷ Goar (1987, p. 13-21)

⁹⁸ Goar (1987, p. 1), Rawson (1985, p. 95) and footnote 60, on the same page.

⁹⁹ Goar (1987, pp. 13-15)

¹⁰⁰ Rawson (1975, p. 248)

the cause and which was the consequence since the two are so co-dependent. However, it does make clear that the character of Cato the Elder is an important aspect of the dialogue, even if it is not entirely possible to separate it from the substance of the dialogue.

VI. The Intellectual Life

The theme of intellectual (scholarly) pursuits has by far remained one of the most controversial aspects of the dialogue. The characterization of Cato the Elder enjoying, much less advocating, anything resembling a philhellenic pursuit has caused consternation. Cicero's coy hints, in the introduction, of certain authorial liberties has only emboldened critics to allege that the depiction of Cato is entirely superficial¹⁰¹, which has led to debate over both how to approach the text and what lines of inquiry are justified¹⁰². Even those willing to credit Cicero with diligent care for his characterizations find the intellectual pursuits aspect entirely suspect¹⁰³. To resolve this apparent conflict, the attempt is sometimes made to extricate the 'historical' Cato from the dialogue. This has been mostly accomplished through dismissing those aspects and themes of the dialogue that clash with some accepted notion of the 'true' Cato. Jones, as mentioned earlier, is the perfect example of this:

“[A]ll those comments put into Cato's mouth by Cicero which denote an enthusiasm for Greek literature and philosophy – and there are many of them- are obviously inappropriate. In these instances Cicero is expressing his own views in the mouth of Cato¹⁰⁴.”

This approach is flawed for many reasons, not the least of which is that Cato is the dialogue's speaker and thus embodies its arguments. There is no clear dividing line between 'fact' and

¹⁰¹ Rawson (1972, p. 39). She speaks of this generally, but specifically the criticisms of Muenzer and Kammer. Astin (1978, p. 298) takes a strangely ambivalent stance on this, giving Cicero credit for his research but then also dismissing most of the characterisation: “In so far as the historical Cato happened to have some opinions and characteristics which Cicero wished to commend, so much the better; but these did not determine his choice and where necessary could be supplemented extensively.”

¹⁰² Powell (1988, pp. 19-21), Rawson (1972, p. 39), Jones (1939, p. 321), Astin (1978, p. 297) Appendix 1

¹⁰³ See for example Jones (1939 pp. 308- 321).

¹⁰⁴ Jones (1939 p. 321)

‘fiction’ in this matter. Separating those parts of the dialogue where the characterization of Cato was shaped by its rhetorical requirements from the parts where the characterization of Cato shapes the form of that rhetoric (such as the attempt to make the literary references suit Cato¹⁰⁵), is quite beyond the realm of possibility because almost all of it – characterization, rhetoric- is put into Cato’s mouth. Any line between the two is further blurred by Cicero’s own admiration for and idealization of Cato¹⁰⁶, for as Astin says:

“...having accepted the general idea of Cato as an admirable citizen, to ascribe to him whatever quality or talent was appropriate to the immediate argument, without stopping to consider whether or not this could be justified by reference to historical evidence...”¹⁰⁷

For those reasons, one cannot simply chalk up (for example) the legion of Greek references deployed in the text to rhetorical necessity, or the characterization of Cato as fond of literary pursuits as a logical expediency to explain the former. The characterization may fulfil both functions- something that is alluded to in the introduction. As Levine argued, it may serve to put a suitably Roman (and practical) face on what might be considered a suspiciously Greek past-time¹⁰⁸. The theme of intellectual pursuits runs through the entire dialogue and it is not limited to the expediencies of the rhetoric: it is a fundamental part of the dialogue’s argument, and its characterization of Cato.

To begin with, the theme of intellectual pursuits has a prominent role in the positive characterizations of figures in the dialogue. When Cato sets up Q. Fabius Maximus as his model at the very beginning of the dialogue, this theme is present (although intertwined with the many other signs of Maximus’ virtue):

“The funeral oration delivered by him on that occasion is in general circulation, and, when we read it, what philosopher does not appear contemptible? Nor was it merely in public that he was great, but he was greater still in the privacy of his home. What conversation! What maxims! What a knowledge of ancient history! What skill in augural law! He had also read much, for a Roman, and knew by heart the

¹⁰⁵ Powell (1988 p. 19) “Cicero does seem to have made some effort to make the Greek literary references fit the character of Cato. It was not unrealistic, for example, to make Cato quote Xenophon with approval.” As to how it is not unrealistic, see Astin (1978, p. 188)

¹⁰⁶ Astin (1978, p. 297), Rawson (1972, p. 40), Powell (1988, pp. 17-19), Mackendrick and Singh (1989 p. 211)

¹⁰⁷ Astin (1978, p. 299)

¹⁰⁸ Levine (1958, pp. 146,151)

*entire history, not only of our own wars, but of foreign wars as well. I was at that time, eager to profit by his conversation as if I already foresaw what, in fact, came to pass, that, when he was gone, I should have no one from whom to learn.*¹⁰⁹

The funeral oration, while not part of a scholarly tradition per se, is interesting for its comparison to philosophy and the fact that it is ‘in general circulation’. The phrase “*est in manibus laudatio*” is a little vague, according to Powell¹¹⁰, but considering ‘*legimus*’ it seems a pretty clear indication that it is the product of a literary pursuit¹¹¹. The second point of interest is that what Cato describes as making him so outstanding (*praestantior*) is his wit and wisdom, which are tied to his learning- his knowledge of history, for example, which is itself a product of his literary pursuits (*litterae*). Yet despite (or perhaps, because of) the fact that the oration is both better than anything a philosopher could do and is published, it is then necessary that it be kept within the proper bounds: Maximus’ literary inclinations and studies are only many by Roman standards. They are not comparable to studies of more literary (i.e. Greek) peoples, or even the always-suspect “Hellenizing eggheads.”¹¹² As long as it is suitably Roman, it is an important characteristic of the model man.

As Quintus Fabius Maximus is Cato’s model, Cato is the model old man of the dialogue¹¹³. The same thread of intellectual and scholarly pursuits that is seen in Quintus Fabius Maximus runs through Cato’s characterization. This not only includes the numerous Greek references (culled from his studies, Cato says¹¹⁴) that pepper the text, but also his descriptions of the pleasant old ages of other men¹¹⁵, and finally, his description of his own activities and desires.

¹⁰⁹ De Senectute IV:12

¹¹⁰ Powell (1988, p. 128)

¹¹¹ Especially when, according to Powell (ibid.) the phrase ‘in manibus’ is also used to refer to an author’s work in progress. In any case, it is definitely something written down.

¹¹² Levine (1958, p. 146)

¹¹³ If not, why would Scipio and Laelius praise his faultless wisdom on the matter? De Senectute II:5

¹¹⁴ De Senectute :VIII:26

¹¹⁵ De Senectute: VII:22, VIII:26, XIV:49

He describes himself as having a thirst for learning¹¹⁶, and of his own active and happy old age, he says:

“I am now at work on the seventh volume of my Antiquities. I am collecting all the records of our ancient history, and at the present moment am revising all the speeches made by me in the notable causes which I conducted. I am investigating the augural, pontifical, and secular law; I also devote much of my time to Greek literature.”¹¹⁷

Intellectual pursuits figure highly into the dialogue’s discussion of pleasure. The central premise is that old age is not without its pleasures and that these pleasures are superior to those that age removes from consideration. Physical strength is replaced by mental strength¹¹⁸ and the loss of physical pleasure clears the way for the pleasure of the wise: philosophy (although it was not and could not have been put in those terms) and study,¹¹⁹ both of which Cato is depicted as dabbling in¹²⁰.

“Therefore, how can the pleasures of feasting, plays, and brothels be compared with the pleasures which these men enjoyed? But theirs was a zeal for learning, and this zeal, at least in the case of wise and well-trained men, advances in even pace with age [...] surely there can be no greater pleasure than the pleasures of the mind”¹²¹.

Thus we have a Cato who confesses to both engaging in and enjoying intellectual pursuits, as did his own model old man, Quintus Fabius Maximus; the introduction, we have Cicero voice similar sentiments in relation to the writing of the dialogue¹²². Clearly, the intellectual life is not an insignificant part of the dialogue and it is not merely part of the rhetoric. There is straightforward symmetry between the strata here, and perhaps a little of the urge to “...emphasise those characteristics of Cato which corresponded to his [Cicero’s] own and to smooth over the rough

¹¹⁶ De Senectute:VIII:26

¹¹⁷ De Senectute: XI:38. VIII:26 has similar overtones.

¹¹⁸ De Senectute X:33, XI:38,

¹¹⁹ De Senectute XII:41-42, XIV:49-50

¹²⁰ De Senectute XI:38. The dialogue itself is a depiction of Cato dabbling in (applied) philosophy.

¹²¹ De Senectute XIV:50

¹²² De Senectute I:2

edges of those that did not.¹²³” Such intellectual interests, after all, were something valued and appreciated by Cicero and those in his intellectual circle, including Cato the Younger.¹²⁴

However, while intellectual pursuits are somewhat praised as worthy for their own sake, they mostly, as in the case of Quintus Fabius Maximus, fall within careful boundaries. While there are examples in the dialogue of people who were entirely involved in intellectual pursuits and little else - philosophers, poets, etc- those examples are of Greeks¹²⁵. The passage detailing Cato’s intellectual pursuits (quoted in part above) is also details his ‘active life’ in politics, and within the passage, the two are quite intertwined. Yet intellectual pursuits are considered a leisure activity:

“...nothing can be pleasanter than an old age of leisure,¹²⁶”

Cato says, reflecting on ‘the food of study and philosophy’. It is acceptable because retirement and leisure activities are appropriate for an old man:

“...both by law and by custom men of my age are exempt from those public services which cannot be rendered without strength of body. Therefore, we are not only not required to do what we cannot perform, but we are not required to do even as much as we can¹²⁷.”

Yet the dialogue is not entirely content with this line of reasoning. The passage above (excerpted from chapter eleven) continues,

“Yet, it may be urged, many old men are so feeble that they can perform no function that duty or indeed any position in life demands. True, but that is not peculiar to old age; generally it is characteristic of ill-health. ¹²⁸ [...] It is our duty, my young friends, to resist old age; to compensate for its defects by a watchful care; to fight against it as we would fight against disease¹²⁹...”

Cato then goes on to speak of old men¹³⁰ who, fighting age as they would disease, would not claim age as an excuse for dereliction of duty. Old age itself is not an entirely acceptable reason

¹²³ MacKendrick and Singh (1989, p. 211)

¹²⁴ Rawson (1985, pp. 95-96)

¹²⁵ De Senectute: VII:23

¹²⁶ De Senectute XIV:49 Shuckburgh (1909)

¹²⁷ De Senectute: XI:35

¹²⁸ De Senectute: XI:35

¹²⁹ De Senectute: XI:35-36

¹³⁰ Appius and Cato himself. De Senectute XI:37-38

for retiring from the active life and scholarly pursuits for their own sake can never quite be unreservedly advocated. This is overcome by redefining *otium* in such a way as to make it compatible with *negotium*¹³¹; in other words, presenting the leisure of intellectual life as a supplement to the work of the active life. Cato mixes his studies with his duties, letting his duties shape the character and aims of his studies and using his studies to better perform his duties. He works on his Origines, revises his speeches for publication, investigates augural, pontifical, and secular law, debates and provides counsel.¹³² His De Agricultura is both a literary exercise and immensely practical but it is not an idle pleasure. Wisdom and learning can be more important than physical strength¹³³, because that learning, properly employed, aids in the instruction of the youth¹³⁴. Scholarly pursuits, in other words, are just part of the *negotium* of an old man. Lacking physical strength, the ideal old man does through literacy what he can not do through action¹³⁵ and he does it for posterity. At the end of a long passage in which he speaks of men famous for their literary pursuits, Cato switches, as he often does, to agricultural examples and metaphors:

*“He plants the trees to serve another age, as our Caecilius Staius says [...] And if you ask a farmer, however old, for whom he is planting he will unhesitatingly reply, “For the immortal gods, who have willed not only that I should receive these blessings from my ancestors, but also that I should hand them on to posterity.”*¹³⁶

In the agriculture-themed section of the dialogue¹³⁷, Cato strongly recommends that Scipio and Laelius read the works of Xenophon- with a specific mention of the Oeconomicus- for their practical instructive qualities and, by implication, the external audience as well¹³⁸. In the passage that serves to remind the reader of the historical tradition of Cato’s Greek learning and

¹³¹See: Steel, (2005, pp. 82, 50, 139), for more on this in Cicero’s writing.

¹³² De Senectute: XI:38-39

¹³³ De Senectute: IX:27

¹³⁴ De Senectute: IX:29. “What more exalted service can there be than this?”

¹³⁵ De Senectute: XI:38

¹³⁶ De Senectute: VII:24-25

¹³⁷ De Senectute: XV - XVII

¹³⁸ De Senectute: XVII:59 “Xenophon’s writings are very instructive on many subjects and I beg you to go on reading them with studious care...”

thereby excuse the excess of Greek references¹³⁹, there is the implication that the learning (and thus the references) has allowed Cato to better instruct Scipio and Laelius. Instruction that is presented as a right and proper activity for an old man¹⁴⁰; it is another way to work for posterity, and to benefit¹⁴¹ the *res publica* in some way. Of course, gaining and sharing wisdom is something an old man can only do if he remains mentally acute, something which takes effort¹⁴². Intellectual pursuits are presented as one of the best ways to achieve that end¹⁴³.

This concern for productive leisure is one of the more intriguing aspects of the dialogue. It demonstrates a very typical anxiety over the conflict between *otium* and *negotium*. In a culture where luxury¹⁴⁴ and laziness (defined as not taking part in public life)¹⁴⁵ were the cardinal sins, this concern¹⁴⁶ over what constitutes good *otium* does not come as a surprise. Cicero resolved this through advocating leisure that benefited the state and public¹⁴⁷. It also seems an ‘appropriately Catonian’ attitude, in light of the practical bent to many of his actual writings: practical guides to agriculture, the military, and the law¹⁴⁸. Cicero, familiar with Cato’s writings¹⁴⁹, could not have been unaware of that.

Yet, despite the appropriateness of practical overtones, there is something Ciceronian here as well:

“...if I could not perform these services [referring to the list of activities he undertakes as part of public life] , nevertheless, my couch would afford me delight while reflecting on the very things that I

¹³⁹ De Senectute: VIII:26

¹⁴⁰ De Senectute: VI: 17, XIII:45

¹⁴¹ De Senectute :VI:17

¹⁴² De Senectute: VII:19-VIII:26. (e.g. “Old men retain their mental faculties, provided their interest and application continue...” VII:22. “These employments are my intellectual gymnastics [...] and while I sweat and toil with them I do not greatly feel the loss of bodily strength.” XI:38)

¹⁴³ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ Edwards (1993, p. 5)

¹⁴⁵ Earl (1967, p. 23)

¹⁴⁶ Steel (2005, pp.81-82)

¹⁴⁷ Steel (2005, pp. 82, 50, 139)

¹⁴⁸ Astin (1978, pp. 183-185, 204). As is indeed referenced in the passage concerning his activities and investigations (De Senectute: VIII:26). Even the *Origines* had a purpose. See Astin again, p. 217.

¹⁴⁹ Astin (1978 p. 299)

lacked the strength to do [...] for the man who lives always amid such studies and pursuits as mine is not aware of the steady approach of age¹⁵⁰."

In the context of the dialogue, this refers to physical infirmity. However, one must not overlook the fact that the activities listed were currently denied to Cicero. There is a certain tone here, especially highlighted by the focus on an active public life in the preceding passages, that implies that while it would be acceptable, it would be a distant and grudging second to the involvement that Cicero's Cato has been speaking about with such passion.

This is more than simply just a bitter remark on Cicero's part, especially in light of the tension between work and leisure, and his usual way of resolving it. The dialogue is precisely what is described in the passage; it reflects what Cicero would be doing- should be doing- if circumstances allowed. This is a perfect example of the subtextual dissonance that arises from asymmetry between the layers of this text. This little passage and the intellectual pursuits theme also justifies Cicero's more philosophic pursuits, taken up whenever he was forcibly kept from involvement in public life¹⁵¹. "The writing of philosophy, then, is presented as an alternative form of public activity, not as a retreat from it, even during Caesar's dictatorship¹⁵²," as Catherine Steel notes. This passage certainly reflects that sentiment. In the terminology of the dialogue, it might be described as the role of intellectual pursuits in supplementing the tasks of influence (instructing, advising, etc).

It also can be read as a justification for Cato the Younger's intellectual pursuits. Upon his death (about two years prior to the composition of De Senectute), the younger Cato became a target for literary interpretation and commemoration¹⁵³: a new way "of discussing the res publica

¹⁵⁰ De Senectute: XI:38

¹⁵¹ Steel (2005, pp. 43, 136-138)

¹⁵² Steel (2005, p. 139)

¹⁵³ Steel (2005, p. 34)

and their [the elite] place within it¹⁵⁴”. It seems likely that any discussion of Cato *Censoris* around this time would also bring to mind Cato *Uticensis*. By having Cato the Elder wax enthusiastic about philosophy (even if it not explicitly identified as such), the dialogue implicitly affirms the rightness of Cato the Younger’s own intellectual pursuits, as well as his self-representation as a true heir of his famous ancestor. Yet even this can be understood as part of the attempt to find ‘their place within’ these new circumstances. This intellectual and literary theme offers a way to be involved and to work for posterity, even when the active life is made impossible by either physical infirmity or the collapse of the old system.

VII. The Grand Old Man

Influence, another aspect at the heart of the dialogue, is not merely the companion to learning (i.e. teaching). Influence is one of the traits intrinsic to the role of elder statesman, the Grand Old Man. Of course, in modern terms, this is a rather vague description occasionally given to a man that excels at, is famous for, and is well established in, his chosen profession; and to whom is accorded great- and somewhat awed- respect. This term is well suited to the dialogue, for Cato and his model old man, Q. Fabius, both fit this description, and within the dialogue this role is tied in with a variety of related concepts. The dialogue classes them generally around ‘influence’, and being shown due respect. This does, however, extend to cover so many other- but related- ideas that it overtaxes the word ‘influence’ or even ‘elder statesman’: included in this role is the cultivation of protégés¹⁵⁵, the dispensation of advice and wisdom¹⁵⁶, the rosy memories of a life well lived¹⁵⁷, the benefits of seniority in politics¹⁵⁸, and the honor of being the one people turn to in crisis¹⁵⁹. Grand Old Man is a much more appropriate term since it has enough flexibility in

¹⁵⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ De Senectute: VIII:26, IX:29

¹⁵⁶ De Senectute: XVIII:63

¹⁵⁷ De Senectute: III:9

¹⁵⁸ De Senectute: XVIII:64-65

¹⁵⁹ De Senectute: VI:16,20-21

its definition to cover all of these things. Of course, not everyone can be a Grand Old Man, but ideals need not be democratic.

The conception of this role has an unmistakable Roman character¹⁶⁰. For example, the reward of a good life- lived in service of the state - are the ‘marks of honor’ paid to him:

“the morning visit, being sought after, being made way for, having people rise at one’s approach, being escorted to and from the forum, being asked for advice¹⁶¹ ...”

As a reward of a good life, this role is naturally described as a pleasant and joyful thing. Therefore, it is not surprising that the section of the dialogue concerning pleasure devotes so much to the joys surrounding this role. The most basic, and indeed, first discussed, pleasure is virtue itself, which is reaped at the end of life:

“Undoubtedly, Scipio and Laelius, the most suitable defenses of old age are the principles and practice of the virtues, which, if cultivated in every period of life, bring forth wonderful fruits at the close of a long and busy career, not only because they never fail you even at the very end of life- although that is a matter of highest moment- but also because it is most delightful to have the consciousness of a life well spent and the memory of many deeds worthily performed¹⁶².”

The Grand Old Man can thus bask in the memories of his grand deeds for the state¹⁶³. Of course, those grand deeds and that virtuous life bring as a consequence other pleasures. Such things bring influence. Influence is at the core of this concept- the role of Nestor¹⁶⁴- and is described as its prime reward:

“Surely old age, when crowned with public honors, enjoys an influence which is of more account than all the sensual pleasures of youth.¹⁶⁵”

“What physical pleasures, then, are comparable to the distinction which influence bestows¹⁶⁶?”

¹⁶⁰ See Earl (1967, pp. 20-21)

¹⁶¹ De Senectute: XVIII:63

¹⁶² De Senectute: III:9

¹⁶³ De Senectute: V:13 . The Roman examples include capturing cities, winning battles, and celebrating triumphs.

¹⁶⁴ De Senectute: X:31

¹⁶⁵ De Senectute: XVII:61

¹⁶⁶ De Senectute: XVIII:64

In this respect, the role of the Grand Old Man touches back upon intellectual pursuits. The pleasures of the mind were to a certain extent justified by applying them to instruction; here, instruction, though beneficial, is also lauded as one of the great joys of old age. This instruction is obviously not that of the schoolteacher. It is closely related to the idea of respect and being honored. The role of instructor/mentor is a product of having younger men turning to him for advice, out of respect, and of having them cultivate him as Cato cultivated Q. Fabius Maximus, an honor; it is a role stemming from the Grand Old Man's influence. For example, Cato mentions that he enjoys even 'afternoon banquets' for the conversation, which is with Scipio and Laelius and their contemporaries and rarely with men his own age¹⁶⁷. Of course, very few of Cato's contemporaries remained, but the specific reference to the younger men (Scipio and Laelius) implies that it is not simply a case of having no one else with whom to speak. This pleasure was briefly brought up and expounded upon in an earlier part of the dialogue:

"For just as wise men, when they are old take delight in the society of youths endowed with sprightly wit, and the burdens of age are rendered lighter to those who are courted and highly esteemed by the young, so young men find pleasure in their elders, by whose precepts they are led into virtue's paths; nor indeed do I feel that I am any less of a pleasure to you than you are to me¹⁶⁸"

"For what is more agreeable than an old age surrounded by the enthusiasm of youth¹⁶⁹?"

It is thus both the old man's pleasure and his due to be surrounded by younger men, conversing with them and educating them. They are drawn to him by his virtue, and thus it was his virtuous life (which naturally is centered around public virtue, the service of the state as well as private virtue¹⁷⁰) that grants him influence over the younger generation. While Cato is the one speaking of these things, usually in direct reference to others, he also epitomizes it. Cato still holds a great deal of influence over politics¹⁷¹, most visible in his calling for Carthage's

¹⁶⁷ De Senectute: XIV:46.

¹⁶⁸ De Senectute: VIII:26

¹⁶⁹ De Senectute: IX:29

¹⁷⁰ De Senectute: IV:12. Q. Fabius Maximus, as Cato's Grand Old Man, has as much credit to his name for what he does in the private sphere as in the public sphere.

¹⁷¹ De Senectute: V:14, VI:16

destruction¹⁷², but also detectable in his list of usual activities¹⁷³. The much younger Scipio and Laelius (who were in their prime- and were leading statesmen of their era¹⁷⁴) are eager to cultivate Cato, as he cultivated Quintus Fabius Maximus; they have been drawn to him out of respect. They praise him for his “pre-eminent [...] wisdom in matters generally...¹⁷⁵” and plead with him to share his wisdom and experience on the matter at hand¹⁷⁶. Furthermore, they do not speak after chapter three, and the single objection raised is phrased very respectfully¹⁷⁷. There are many obvious parallels with the example of Cato wishing “to profit by his [Q. Fabius’] conversation.¹⁷⁸”

This is the transcending symmetry of the dialogue: younger men, in their time, turning to some other Grand Old Man for guidance, before growing into the role themselves and similarly advising the next generation. Cato depicts himself as learning from Quintus Fabius Maximus. Scipio and Laelius are depicted as similarly looking up to Cato. By casting them in the role he did, Cicero is casting himself (and, by extension, the reader) as picking up on that tradition of ancient wisdom through Scipio and Laelius. Of course, Cicero himself was careful to remind us that he too is now an old man¹⁷⁹.

Yet it is not merely age that makes a Grand Old Man. Cato admonishes that such an old age requires a ‘foundation well laid in youth’, and that ‘wrinkles and grey hair’ do not magically grant influence¹⁸⁰. However, there is an element of the role as being naturally due to any suitably virtuous and elderly man:

“...augurs who are older are preferred not only to those who have held higher office, but even to those who are actually in possession of imperium.¹⁸¹”

¹⁷² De Senectute: VI:16,

¹⁷³ De Senectute: XI:38

¹⁷⁴ Astin (1967, p. 244)

¹⁷⁵ De Senectute: II:4

¹⁷⁶ De Senectute: II:6-7

¹⁷⁷ De Senectute: III:8 “What you say is true, Cato: but perhaps someone may reply...”

¹⁷⁸ De Senectute: IV:12

¹⁷⁹ De Senectute: I:2

¹⁸⁰ De Senectute: XVII:62

¹⁸¹ De Senectute: XVIII:64

Cato comments that the ‘marks of honor’ mentioned above are

*“civilities most scrupulously observed among us and in every other state in proportion as its morals are good,”*¹⁸²

implying that they are something that any deserving old man should thus expect. Here is the transcending *asymmetry* of the dialogue- the biggest reason it cannot be taken as a simple practical guide to old age. Cicero, despite his position and his age, was writing this while tucked away in a villa. The role of the Grand Old Man of Politics was the product of the Republic; what meaning could it hold, if it could exist at all, in the context of the troubling circumstances¹⁸³ of Caesar, *Dictator Perpetuus*? By the standards of the dialogue, Rome’s morals were obviously not up to scratch. This was reflected upon slightly in the earlier discussion of scholarly pursuits as an alternative to the active life. We see that all discussions of the role of the Grand Old Man in the dialogue are given such a terrible poignancy when this is remembered. The ideal of seniority over *imperium* seems absurd when political power requires an army to back it up. From this poignancy stems the interpretation that *De Senectute* is a consolation¹⁸⁴. It is in many ways a loving description of what Cicero desires and what has been denied to him. Indeed, there are certain parallels between Cicero and Cato that may have made it attractive to cast Cato in the central role. Cato was also a new man, a leading statesman, orator, and scholar¹⁸⁵. His status as a Grand Old Man was a result and natural reward (according to the dialogue) of these things and which now equally applied to Cicero. Yet Cicero was sidelined and he did not wield the level of influence he so ardently desired¹⁸⁶. That the dialogue is set in Cicero’s “beloved second century¹⁸⁷” seems a sign that such a role could only exist in the past. “He may well have thought

¹⁸² De Senectute: XVIII:63

¹⁸³ De Senectute I:1

¹⁸⁴ Rawson (1975, p.246), Powell (1988, pp. 3-4)

¹⁸⁵ Astin (1978, pp. 131, 182, 297)

¹⁸⁶ Rawson (1975, pp. 211, 291)

¹⁸⁷ Rawson (1975, p. 246)

he would not live to see Rome restored to its proper condition, or regain the authority to which his age and experience entitled him¹⁸⁸,” as Powell said.

Yet even if that is true, it is interesting that the role of the Grand Old Man in the dialogue has undertones of duty, as well. The Grand Old Man is not honored so that he can sit on his laurels. He can enjoy the pleasures of instruction and the attention, and turn to work suiting an old man, but he still has his duties. As mentioned earlier, concerning literacy, the old man works for posterity, but he also must work to counterbalance the rashness of youth.

“And indeed, if you care to read or hear foreign history, you will find that the greatest states have been overthrown by the young and sustained and restored by the old. How lost you, pray, your mighty state so soon? For such is the question put in a play [...] Several answers are given, but the one chiefly in point is this: Through swarms of green, declaiming, silly lads. True enough, for rashness is the product of the budding-time of youth, prudence the harvest-time of age¹⁸⁹.”

In fact, Cato compares the role of the grand old man to that of the captain of a ship¹⁹⁰, and discusses the role of such men¹⁹¹, including himself, in leading the state and protecting it from danger.¹⁹² Influence may be a reward for a virtuous life, but it mandates using it:

“The men who have put these distinctions to noble use are, it seems to me, like skilful actors who have played their parts in the drama of life to the end, and not like untrained players who have broken down in the last act¹⁹³.”

To suddenly bow out of public life and not put influence to good use would be a travesty. The old men still have their part to play, as the small digressions on the terms ‘senate’ and ‘senators’¹⁹⁴ indicate. The state needs its Grand Old Men to guide it and save it from the rashness of youth.

The etymology of ‘senator’ is given in a passage that speaks of Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus¹⁹⁵

¹⁸⁸ Powell (1988 p. 3)

¹⁸⁹ De Senectute: VI:20-21

¹⁹⁰ De Senectute: VI:17

¹⁹¹ De Senectute: XVI: 56, Cincinnatus, XVII:59, Lucius Caecilius Metellus, Aulus Atilius Catatinus.

¹⁹² De Senectute: VI:18. Specifically against Carthage

¹⁹³ De Senectute: XVIII:64

¹⁹⁴ De Senectute: VI: 20 (senate) XV:56 (senators)

¹⁹⁵ Who famously became dictator out of duty, not from desire, and was quick to shed the title. See Livy’s *Ab Urbe Condita*, III: 26-29

as an old farmer, coming to power in order to save the state... specifically from one who was attempting to seize regal power¹⁹⁶.

It may be possible to see some of the earlier poignancy here, in the asymmetry between the examples and the actual contemporary situation, but it seems more pointed than that. The Republic was in dire straits, and yet its suitably virtuous and learned elder-statesmen— one in particular— were not being given their proper due. Not only is it a sign of things have gone wrong, it is also an indication of how things should be set right; the state should turn to its learned old men and let them save the state (again, in Cicero's case). Yet the poignancy remains; it was only in the Rome of the dialogue that this could happen.

This is the fundamental reason behind the casting of Cato, and not a contemporary figure, Cicero himself, or even a mythological figure. Singh (as have many others) voices the usual reasons: Cato's longevity and active old age¹⁹⁷. But this was not all: the role Cicero desired and spoke so passionately about was a very real and earthly thing. A mythological figure would not have been able to do it justice. It could not be Cicero or a contemporary for the reason above: the role no longer existed. But Cato the Elder can certainly be seen as one of the Grandest of old men, too, in his very long life and just as long and distinguished public career. He was legend, even in Cicero's time, but was also someone with whom it was still possibly to identify, even if he was slightly outside of living memory.

VIII. Conclusion

The portrayal of Cato the Elder is significant because it is the foundation of every instance of symmetry and asymmetry within the text; it is the fundament of both the narrative and the subtext. It is the middle ground between the circumstances of the era in which it was

¹⁹⁶ De Senectute: XVI:56

¹⁹⁷ Mackendrick and Singh (1989 p. 210)

composed and the highly idealized and even more remote past. Anything the dialogue needs to say must be said through that medium. The degree to which the dialogue's message was shaped by that portrayal- a mixture of history, ideal, and expediency – cannot be entirely discerned. The issue itself is something of an ouroboros: there is no clear line between where portrayal begins and where the dialogue's arguments end, if such a distinction is possible at all. However, that portrayal's influence is detectable throughout the text.

Cicero's efforts to create a credible representation of Cato¹⁹⁸ should not be dismissed as superficial, and the historical tradition surrounding Cato should also be considered. The decision to place the dialogue within a Catonian context carries many implications for the text's message. Cato's central role, in tandem with the agricultural theme, successfully places the dialogue and its arguments within the context of the idealized past (i.e. the world as it should be), which greatly undermines the idea that the dialogue is little more than an ancient self-help manual. The ideal world described in the text had been shattered by the many changes to Rome's political and social structure. The dialogue evokes the idealized past by utilizing the idea and image of Cato as the old fashioned citizen-soldier and farmer, an image which has its origins in Cato's own self-fashioning. The agriculture theme is doubly useful, in that it is an appropriate tool for characterization of the elder Cato, but it also provides a useful outlet for the dialogue's Stoic ideas, which are naturally reminiscent of Cato the Younger¹⁹⁹, who made a point of identifying himself with his famous great-grandfather. The agriculture theme is thus made appropriately Catonian in two senses, thereby strengthening a portrayal that, according to orthodoxy, should have been like mixing oil and water, due to Cato the Elder's famous dislike of anything Greek, including philosophy²⁰⁰. It seems credible that this portrayal fit into the ongoing struggle to define

¹⁹⁸ Powell (1988, pp. 19-20)

¹⁹⁹ Goar (1987, p. 1), Rawson (1985, p. 95) and footnote 60, on the same page.

²⁰⁰ Astin (1978, p. 156). Astin argues against it, though. See also Jones (1939), Powell (1988, p. 18)

Cato the Younger's legacy by legitimizing his claim to his great-grandfather's virtue within the text.

The intellectual pursuits theme is interesting for similar reasons. Given how thoroughly it pervades the dialogue, it seems unlikely that it was present solely to justify a more sophisticated writing style and the use of necessary literary examples. While it does allow for both the former and the latter, it is also clearly set up as a fundamental component of a good old age: it is depicted as valued by Cicero, Cato, and Quintus Fabius Maximus. It is also kept within careful boundaries, reflecting anxieties over leisure and suitably Roman pursuits. It works to balance between the trappings of a good Roman active life and the trappings of a luxurious, lazy Greek private life. This is done through applying the benefits of intellectual pursuits to the state, albeit indirectly at times: intellectual pursuits allow statesmen to lead better, and to continue to lead longer. They allow mentors to better instruct younger statesmen and future statesmen and, at the very least, they allow a man to pass down knowledge and wisdom to future generations in the form of histories and other literary works. Yet because these pursuits are treated at best as a supplement to the active life and, at worst, as a sorry substitute for it, the fact that the author was writing the dialogue- a philosophical and literary undertaking- while under enforced semi-retirement²⁰¹ cannot be ignored. Cato is shown to be enjoying a happy old age, freely dabbling in more scholarly pursuits on the side for both his own enjoyment and to better fulfil his role as the extremely respected and honored elder statesman. He is depicted as the product of a less corrupt age; he represents an ideal²⁰². Casting him in the role makes it possible for Cicero to both justify the writing of the dialogue and to try to find a place for himself and his peers in the changed world.

A related idea is an important aspect of the theme of the Grand Old Man- a theme that is key to the portrayal of Cato. It is a role and a description that suits him even more than

²⁰¹ Rawson (1975, pp. 229-231)

²⁰² Astin (1978, p. 289) "Above all he could appear – or be presented- as an idealized public figure, as a wise counsellor, as one of the outstanding senators of the Roman Republic."

agriculture, for even today he is still famous for remaining involved and influential up until the end of his days²⁰³. At the heart of the role of the Grand Old Man is influence, both over the public and over individuals. Essentially, it is the respect due to a suitably wise, accomplished, and elderly statesman. The dialogue sends the message that the young should defer to their older and wiser counterparts through a pattern of Grand Old Men. Cato is shown deferring to Quintus Fabius Maximus, while Scipio and Laelius are shown being deferential to him. In turn, the dialogue can be seen as an opportunity for the reader to take in the advice of past generations and that of Cicero himself. The dialogue presents this as the proper order of things, a melancholy sentiment considering the circumstances. That may be how things should have been, but that was not how they were. Cicero was most certainly not enjoying the privileges described in De Senectute. Cato represents his desires denied, which is why Cicero or a contemporary of his could not have been cast in the speaking role of the dialogue: the role only existed in the past. The dialogue is not overly melancholy, although there is a certain bittersweet wistfulness, which explains the conflicted nature that is visible underneath the soothing and charming qualities that have endeared²⁰⁴ it to later readers. Cicero says in the introduction that he has written the dialogue as a consolation against the ills of old age- he even goes as far to say that it was entirely effective²⁰⁵ cure against its annoyances. One is forced to suspect from the use and portrayal of Cato the Elder in the dialogue that Cicero's comment was not entirely in earnest.

²⁰³ e.g. He is still famous for 'Carthago Delenda Est'. Astin (1978, p. 289).

²⁰⁴ Powell (1988, p. 4), Falconer (1938, p. v) Preface to the Loeb translation of *De Senectute*.

²⁰⁵ *De Senectute*: I:2

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