

# **Cicero: Untested to Unmatched**

## **SUPERVISED RESEARCH**

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2025

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the growth of Marcus Tullius Cicero over the course of his life as an orator, analyzing his development organized by three notable stages from various points in his career: *Pro Quinctio* in 81 BC, *Pro Caelio* in 56 BC, and *Philippic 2* in 44 BC. By following his evolving manner of self-presentation, propensity for risk-taking, and liberal usage of prosopopoeia, this paper aims to redefine and reframe the lens through which Cicero is viewed in the modern day, demonstrating the series of changes that he underwent in the time between his professional debut as an orator and his publication of the speech that ultimately sealed his fate.

*Keywords:* Marcus Tullius Cicero, oratory, speech, trial, self-presentation, risk-taking, prosopopoeia, *Pro Quinctio*, *Pro Caelio*, *Philippic 2*, P. Quinctius, Clodia, Marc Antony, Roman Republic, moral authority

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As hard as it may be to believe, Cicero did not always occupy his present role as a globally admired orator. In 81 BC, to defend his client Publius Quinctius against the charges that had been made against him in a civil dispute regarding Sextus Naevius' fraudulent usage of a praetorian edict in the seizure of Quinctius' estate, Cicero delivered *Pro Quinctio*.<sup>1</sup> Though he briefly mentions prior cases in the exposition of this speech, *Pro Quinctio* is the earliest of Cicero's speeches that survive today and, for our intents and purposes, marks the beginning of the decades-long career of perhaps the greatest public speaker the world has ever seen.

Being the earliest fully intact speech of Cicero's that survives today, *Pro Quinctio* is a spectacular representation of the manner of risks that a youthful took upon himself at the outset of his career as an orator. This is not necessarily due to any particular feature in the speech itself but rather the circumstances which surround this speech that marked the beginning of a legendary career remembered for millennia.

For *Pro Quinctio*, Cicero, at the ripe young age of twenty-five years old, has yet to prove himself. Perhaps other orators would have made the decision to argue progressively riskier cases and take the time to build themselves up into a significant cultural figure before hurling themselves headfirst into a trial involving some of the most prominent members of Roman society. Not Cicero. Both Q. Hortensius, an esteemed Roman orator and politician, and S. Naevius, a politically and financially powerful man, are influential figures in Roman society.<sup>2</sup> While victory would mean great glory for Cicero, a loss would guarantee humiliation. Cicero's career would have been over before it even began. It is certainly fortunate for us and for all

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<sup>1</sup> Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* (Sweynheym and Pannartz, 1469); Marcus Tullius Cicero, “Pro Quinctio” (Trial of Publius Quinctius, 81BC).

<sup>2</sup> Marcus Tullius Cicero, “Pro Quinctio” (Trial of Publius Quinctius, 81BC).

students of the classics in the time between ourselves and Cicero that he ultimately prevailed in this matter.

This is, in part, thanks to the not insignificant amount of time Cicero spends in *Pro Quinctio* establishing himself and his client as those in positions of vulnerability who are appealing to the judge and jury in the hopes that their sense of morality and justice will right the wrongs committed against them. “...the position is such that I, who have little natural ability and insufficient experience, am pitted against a most accomplished advocate, while my client Quinctius, whose resources are small, who has no opportunities and only a few friends, has to contend with a most influential adversary”.<sup>3</sup> At this point in time, Cicero is neither well-known nor respected. He is cognizant of the fact that he does not share the same level of influence with his opponent and his opponent’s advocate. Yet, Cicero is very clever as he transforms this would be disadvantage into a circumstance that works in his favor. The position he places himself in recalls that of David when he faced Goliath, and it encourages his audience to root for him, the underdog, just as they would David.

Not only that, but we also see Cicero speak on behalf of Naevius for brief periods of time in *Pro Quinctio*. He utilizes phrases such as “does not this man openly declare” and “[t]his is what in reality he openly declares by his deeds”.<sup>4</sup> In this way, Cicero makes his own interpretation of Naevius’ actions the reality for all rather than just his perception. For Cicero need not persuade his audience that his word is truth for the rest of eternity in order for the case he makes to be considered successful. Cicero needs only to convince his audience members to accept his truth as their reality for the moment that they inhabit together in the courtroom or whatever stage he is occupying for his delivery. When Cicero introduces his own thoughts as

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<sup>3</sup> Marcus Tullius Cicero, “Pro Quinctio” (Trial of Publius Quinctius, 81BC).

<sup>4</sup> Marcus Tullius Cicero, “Pro Quinctio” (Trial of Publius Quinctius, 81BC).

Naevius' with such an air of confidence, so compelling is his oratory that the court has no choice but to agree with him.

Cicero brings *Pro Quinctio* to an end rather tastefully, portraying P. Quinctius as a poor old fellow that has turned to every corner of the world, every person with whom he has ever held dear and been scorned by them all. Cicero reminds G. Acquilius, the judge, of P. Quinctius' old age which is rather remarkable as P. Quinctius made it to age sixty when the average lifespan in ancient Rome is twenty-five to thirty years.<sup>5</sup>

[H]e begs that he, whose fidelity to duty has never been called in question, may not, in his sixtieth year, be branded with the mark of the greatest shame and ignominy; that Sextus Naevius may not disgrace all his distinctions by wearing them as trophies; that the good name, which has accompanied him up to his old age, may not be prevented through your decision from attending him even to the grave.<sup>6</sup>

Cicero frames the case in such a way that G. Acquilius is the only entity standing between P. Quinctius and an honorable death, which is surely soon to come. Keep in mind, *Pro Quinctio* is delivered in front of a vocal live audience and in the days of the Roman empire theatrics and eloquent oratory were often prized more than a simple statement of the facts of the matter. The image that Cicero paints of P. Quinctius is so pitiable, so helpless, that if G. Aquilius, the judge, does anything but ruled in favor of P. Quinctius he would be detested by all for eternity. Therefore, G. Aquilius, regardless of who he truly thinks should prevail in this case, is forced to support the cause of P. Quinctius.

This is in stark contrast with *Pro Caelio*, the speech Cicero delivered in 56 BC defending his client Marcus Caelius Rufus against Clodia Metelli, who had accused Caelius of various

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<sup>5</sup> Marcus Tullius Cicero, “Pro Quinctio” (Trial of Publius Quinctius, 81BC); Arienne King, “Growing Old in Ancient Greece & Rome,” World History Encyclopedia, June 5, 2024, <https://www.worldhistory.org/article/2475/growing-old-in-ancient-greece--rome/>.

<sup>6</sup> Marcus Tullius Cicero, “Pro Quinctio” (Trial of Publius Quinctius, 81BC).

crimes including riot instigation and attempted murder.<sup>7</sup> A quarter century post *Pro Quinctio*, after two and a half decades to develop and refine his oratory skill, Cicero takes on a rather different approach when crafting the opening sentences of this speech.

Prosopopoeia is a rhetorical device that Cicero utilizes often throughout his career, representing various imagined or absent characters through speaking.<sup>8</sup> He frequently uses the device to present points which, if expressed using his own voice, would not be as powerful or even acceptable. Beyond that, Cicero uses fictitious representations of people and ideals to make his speech more engaging for the audience which might otherwise be quite unentertained by the goings-on of the courtroom. As Cicero's status in Roman politics and society shifts, so too, does his intended audience. After years and years of delivering speech after speech to listless audiences, Cicero came to an important realization: it is not the judge that holds the most power in a courtroom, but the jury. Following this understanding, Cicero begins to play with the thin boundary between oratory and theatre, catering more so to their passions than their logic.

Throughout the course of *Pro Caelio*, Cicero constructs various imagined personas that will say for him what he cannot. He opens the speech by taking on the role of a stranger to the state of Rome, carefully enveloping the crowd in the first scene of a multi-act play that he puts on for his audience as though he were an actor on the stage in an amphitheater rather than a lawyer in the courtroom.

If, gentlemen, there should happen to be anyone present who is unaware of our laws and courts and customs, I am sure he would wonder what the special gravity of this case might be, seeing that it is the one and only trial to be held at a time of festivities and public games, when all legal business is on vacation. He would undoubtedly conclude that the defendant must be guilty of so serious a crime that unless it is tackled the entire structure of the state will collapse!<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Marcus Tullius Cicero, “Pro Caelio” (Trial of Marcus Caelius Rufus, April 4, 56BC).

<sup>8</sup> “Prosopopoeia” Merriam-webster.com, 2025, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/prosopopoeia>.

<sup>9</sup> Marcus Tullius Cicero, “Pro Caelio” (Trial of Marcus Caelius Rufus, April 4, 56BC).

This stranger serves to ridicule the very premise of the case, reframing a tense murder trial as an act of self-defense or pettiness carried out by two individuals with incredibly personal motivations for pursuing Caelius in this matter: Atratinus who is the lead prosecutor and Clodia who is technically the principal witness in the case but was the true driving force behind the dispute.

In the case of Atratinus, he desires to delay the trial of his father, which would not be able to take place if Caelius were convicted as Caelius himself is the prosecutor for that matter. In order to establish himself as a generally decent man that empathizes with and respects the lives of his fellow citizens, Cicero announces to all that he will go easy on Atratinus on account of either filial feeling, coercion, or tender age.<sup>10</sup> Regardless of which reason Cicero chooses to spare Atratinus for, this statement serves the same three purposes. First, it reinforces the belief that Cicero is a good man who genuinely cares for the Roman people. Second, it undermines Atratinus' ability and reputation as a skilled orator. Finally, in the event that Cicero performs less impressively than the crowd might expect, he can simply cite his wish to be lenient on an up-and-coming youth.

In the case of Clodia, we see how Cicero strategically undermines Clodia not only as an accuser but also as a person and a respectable member of society, effectively dismantling her case through the systematic destruction of her public image. In the instance of *Pro Caelio*, Cicero acts more as a comedian than an orator, scarcely spending any time on the actual facts of the case. Cicero, in *Pro Caelio*, is a stand-up comedian while Clodia, and essentially her entire bloodline, is the butt of his joke. As a modern stand-up comedian would, Cicero walks the unbelievably fine line between humor and offensiveness like it is a tight rope hanging between

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<sup>10</sup> Marcus Tullius Cicero, “Pro Caelio” (Trial of Marcus Caelius Rufus, April 4, 56BC).

two sides of a chasm in The Grand Canyon. “Indeed, my refutation would be framed in considerably more forcible terms if I did not feel inhibited by the fact that the woman’s husband—sorry, I mean brother, I always make that slip—is my personal enemy”.<sup>11</sup> He even is bold enough to slip in a line insinuating an incestuous relationship between Clodia and her brother, playing it off as though it were a mistake and entertaining the audience to no end. His main tactic is to undermine Clodia’s integrity as a reputable contributor to society. Cicero leverages the forum as a traditionally male space and plays on female stereotypes to paint Clodia as a glutton that spends her days frolicking with and preying on young men. She’s vengeful, sexually voracious, and, above all else, an unreliable narrator. He portrays her as a creature ruled by sensuality whose charges the audience is not meant to consider seriously. Cicero blatantly ignores Clodia’s accusations of theft and attempted murder and instead places Caelius in the role of the victim. He spends more time mocking Clodia than defending Caelius against her accusations. Even though this is a murder trial, the overall tone of *Pro Caelio* is significantly more lighthearted than the rest of Cicero’s orations.

Cicero continues to use prosopopoeia throughout *Pro Caelio* as a technique for manipulating his audience’s emotions and deriding Clodia’s life choices. Later in the speech, Cicero goes on to imagine himself as Appius Claudius, Clodia’s stern great-grandfather. Through this voice, he reminds Clodia as well as the rest of the audience that she is not simply a random woman on the street, she is a woman from a respectable family with a duty to fulfill:

Did you never hear that your father, uncle, grandfather, great-grandfather, great-great-grandfather, and great-great-great-grandfather were consuls? Did you forget that only recently you were the wife of Quintus Metellus, a gentleman of the highest type, a distinguished patriot who had only to show his face to eclipse almost all other citizens in character, reputation, dignity? Born of a high-ranking family, married into a prominent family, how did it happen that you admitted Caelius to such familiarity?<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Marcus Tullius Cicero, “*Pro Caelio*” (Trial of Marcus Caelius Rufus, April 4, 56BC).

<sup>12</sup> Marcus Tullius Cicero, “*Pro Caelio*” (Trial of Marcus Caelius Rufus, April 4, 56BC).

By listing out a long line of her ancestors in quick succession and rapid firing multiple questions, Cicero is able to create an effect of incredulity, as if he cannot believe that a woman with such a standing as herself could fall so far from grace. He reveals to the audience that Clodia is not just any woman, but a direct descendant of one of Rome's foundational figures, further amplifying the disgrace cast upon her and her bloodline. Cicero not only establishes that Clodia has shirked her duties as a woman of decent social standing, but it actively shames her and makes the crowd mourn her carelessness which has undone the life's work of all her ancestors who came before her:

Did I break the agreement with King Pyrrhus that you might every day enter into disgusting agreements with your paramours? Did I bring in the Appian Aqueduct that you might put its waters to your dirty uses? Did I build the Appian Way that you might ride up and down with other women's husbands?<sup>13</sup>

Cicero's performance as A. Claudius is ingenious as it allows him to speak using the first person, providing a heightened sense of intimacy that draws the audience further towards his cause. Something so simple as slightly shifting the perspective makes a world of difference in instances such as these. If Cicero had used his own voice to speak of Clodia's great-grandfather's accomplishments, it may have been felt that he was overstepping in family matters.

We are once again treated to a fabulous display of Cicero's great ability for risk-taking in this personal attack against Clodia with *Pro Caelio*, in which he paints the dispute as a lovers' tiff rather than an attempted murder trial. Cicero reframes the case in such a way that takes the jury and judge's minds off the actual substance of the trial as they take in the absolute work of theater that he puts on for them. Such an approach would have been extremely precarious at any point in time, but it was especially so for Cicero that day as he had just returned from his exile which,

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<sup>13</sup> Marcus Tullius Cicero, "Pro Caelio" (Trial of Marcus Caelius Rufus, April 4, 56BC).

interestingly, had been ordered by Publius Clodius Pulcher, Clodia's brother and Cicero's intense political rival.<sup>14</sup>

With this method, Cicero risks being viewed as undignified or cruel. In fact, if he had not spent the better part of his career establishing himself as the moral guardian of the republic and her peoples, Cicero likely would not have been allowed to make such comments without career-ending repercussions. Cicero acknowledges early on in *Pro Caelio* that humor, when executed poorly, could very easily be frowned upon. He states that “[a]buse, on the other hand, has no purpose except to be insulting. If its character is crude, it is called invective; and if it is amusing it passes as wit”.<sup>15</sup> Though here he is speaking in regard to Clodia's defamatory attacks against Caelius, there is no doubt Cicero realizes that this statement applies to his abuse against Clodia too. Cicero is a seasoned orator at this point who understands very well the potential consequences of taking such a bold offensive approach in his response to his client's prosecution and still chooses to proceed as such.

The manner in which Cicero elects to conclude *Pro Caelio* is similarly personal. Although it complements his usual method of acting as a higher moral authority, because Cicero spends a significant part of the speech ridiculing Clodia, it almost feels strange to hear him speak with such sincerity and sternness. Cicero begs the audience to recall their own parents, their own children, sprouting a seed that he planted at the beginning of the speech when he described the sobs of Caelius' mother and the mourning clothes of Caelius' father.

...and as to what the parents feel, that is sufficiently proclaimed by his mother's sobs and indescribable distress, his father's dismal mourning clothes, and all the misery and grief you see because of this trial... Think of your own parents. Think of *your* children and how

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<sup>14</sup> JEFFREY L BULLER, “Cicero's ‘pro Caelio’: Text and Context,” *The Classical Outlook* 71, no. 4 (1994): 121–28, <https://doi.org/10.2307/43937632>.

<sup>15</sup> Marcus Tullius Cicero, “Pro Caelio” (Trial of Marcus Caelius Rufus, April 4, 56BC).

fond you are of them. Feel for him with the sympathy of sons or fathers and bring comfort to his grief.<sup>16</sup>

No longer is it Caelius and his family that faces complete and utter ruin in court. It is the audience members themselves who are at once both the distressed parent and the accused child. At this point, Cicero has worked the judge and jury up into such a frenzied state that they are all desperate for some kind of resolution that will deliver them from their stress. Cicero then conveniently offers the judge and jury an opportunity to do just that by reminding them of their power to release Caelius and his family from the horrible charges laid against them.

Thirteen years later, in 44 BC, just one year before his death, Cicero composes *Philippic* 2, an absolutely scathing personal attack against Marc Antony that completely and publicly decimates every possible aspect of his personal and political identity that may very well have sealed Cicero's fate.<sup>17</sup> Here, we see certain themes arise that are consistent with the image of himself that he puts forth in the later years of his career. Twelve years after *Pro Caelio*, rather than using humor or downplaying his capabilities as an orator, Cicero instead uses the opening sentences of this speech to establish himself as a loyal defender of the republic whom Antony is brutally attacking. In the very first sentence of the address, Cicero begs the question, "To what destiny of mine, O conscript fathers, shall I say that it is owing, that none for the last twenty years has been an enemy to the republic without at the same time declaring war against me?"<sup>18</sup> In this way, Cicero creates a narrative in which it is significantly easier for his audience to support him than to support the opposition, Marc Antony. Cicero speaks not for his own cause, but for Rome and her people. After all, who would dare to side with a single man when his opponent represents the entirety of their republic? That would nearly be treason. In this, Cicero has

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<sup>16</sup> Marcus Tullius Cicero, "Pro Caelio" (Trial of Marcus Caelius Rufus, April 4, 56BC).

<sup>17</sup> Marcus Tullius Cicero, "Philippic 2."

<sup>18</sup> Marcus Tullius Cicero, "Philippic 2."

effectively redefined the matter such that it is no longer a conflict between Antony and himself but rather between Antony and the Roman republic.

We can further observe in the opening sequence of *Philippic* 2 how Cicero muses about Antony's potential motivations for attacking Cicero so publicly before the senate. It really is ingenious how subtly Cicero manages to speak on behalf of Antony, effectively putting words the mouth of his opponent, without ever actually taking on Antony's perspective. Instead, what Cicero does is he considers three plausible reasons that would cause Antony to act in such a way and carefully dismantles the logic behind them.

What am I to think? That I have been despised? I see nothing either in my life, or in my influence in the city, or in my exploits, or even in the moderate abilities with which I am endowed, which Antonius can despise. Did he think that it was easiest to disparage me in the senate? A body which has borne its testimony in favour of many most illustrious citizens that they governed the republic well, but in favour of me alone, of all men, that I preserved it. Or did he wish to contend with me in a rivalry of eloquence? This, indeed, is an act of generosity; for what could be a more fertile or richer subject for me, than to have to speak in defence of myself, and against Antonius?<sup>19</sup>

At this point, Cicero's audience is primed to agree with whatever comes out of Cicero's mouth next, regardless of the true validity of the subsequent statement. Cicero offers little to no evidence in his rebuttal of the three potential stances that Antony could possibly take, because the purpose of this section of Cicero's speech is not to prove that the story he shares is the most truthful of them all. In fact, whether or not one is inclined to agree with the plausibility of Cicero's course of logic is virtually irrelevant to Cicero's main intention at this point in time. The most crucial aspect of this part of the passage is the fact that Cicero, through the mere act of walking us through his thought process, has intentionally placed us as his audience in a position where we naturally share the same perspective as him. Therefore, when Cicero continues with the phrase "[t]his, in fact, is the truth", even though he still speaks using the third person, we feel

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<sup>19</sup> Marcus Tullius Cicero, "Philippic 2."

that Cicero has taken up the role of Antony for himself.<sup>20</sup> We accept Cicero's word as fact as though it were Antony himself speaking through Cicero.

The mere act of releasing *Phillippic 2* is undoubtedly the greatest risk that Cicero has ever taken and the one that will ultimately cost him his life. Cicero, being the sage and experienced orator that he is at this point in his career, publishes it instead of delivering it live in the Senate, wisely avoiding any sort of immediate physical altercation.<sup>21</sup> Cicero likely hoped that his searing review of Antony's character would rally Rome and her peoples enough effectively force Antony out of power. Alas, fortune was not in Cicero's favor this time around as Antony rose to even greater heights as part of the Second Triumvirate and ordered the immediate death of the esteemed orator.<sup>22</sup> As they say, what goes around, comes around.

Nonetheless, we see in the ending of *Phillippic 2* that Cicero has ascended to represent more than simply a mortal man. He is now the defender of the republic, the very vessel that Rome and her peoples live through.

I defended the republic as a young man, I will not abandon it now that I am old. I scorned the sword of Catiline, I will not quail before yours. No, I will rather cheerfully expose my own person, if the liberty of the city can be restored by my death...To me, indeed, O conscript fathers, death is now even desirable, after all the honors which I have gained, and the deeds which I have done. I only pray for these two things: one, that dying I may leave the Roman people free. No greater boon than this can be granted to me by the immortal gods. The other, that every one may meet with a fate suitable to his deserts and conduct towards the republic.<sup>23</sup>

Cicero has placed himself on the moral high ground. He mirrors the present with the past in a balanced structure, speaking of his prior victories in defense of the republic and implying a

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<sup>20</sup> Marcus Tullius Cicero, "Philippic 2."

<sup>21</sup> Ingo Gildenhard, *Cicero, Philippic 2, 44–50, 78–92, 100–119. Latin Text, Study Aids with Vocabulary, and Commentary, Classics Textbooks* (Open Book Publishers, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.11647/obp.0156>.

<sup>22</sup> "The Death of Cicero," UChicago.edu, 2024,

[https://penelope.uchicago.edu/encyclopaedia\\_romana/calendar/cicero.html](https://penelope.uchicago.edu/encyclopaedia_romana/calendar/cicero.html).

<sup>23</sup> Marcus Tullius Cicero, "Philippic 2."

future victory for him in this matter. Cicero boldly declares that he will gladly embrace death if it means the continued prosperity of his city and of his people. It is all quite dramatic and perhaps would have been unnecessary under any normal circumstances but given the manner in which Cicero has just devastated Antony, it is crucial that he leaves the audience with an image of him as a good, well-meaning member of society. He is a very sly man. In his final sentence Cicero wishes that “everyone may meet with a fate suitable to his deserts and conduct towards the republic”, both condemning Antony and commanding himself in one fell swoop.<sup>24</sup> Cicero, in *Philippic 2*, has not only eviscerated his opponent, but he has also made himself a martyr for the Roman people. Now, even on the eve of his death, Cicero has ensured that he will be remembered for posterity as the brave soul that stood up against the face of tyranny and eagerly sacrificed himself for his republic.

When studying Cicero’s life and works, we tend to focus on his later, more well-known performances, overlooking his earlier appearances which provide invaluable insight into his growth and development not just as an orator, but as a member of society. By the end of his life, Cicero is no longer the young orator that needed desperately to appeal to the emotions of the most powerful men in the room to ensure his voice would be heard. Indeed, he has fully and completely transformed in such a way that he is neither a mere orator nor man. He has successfully established himself as an unwavering defender of the Roman republic, one that all others should look upon and model themselves after. Marcus Tullius Cicero came into the world in 106 BC<sup>25</sup> as a human being made of flesh and bone and left it sixty-three years later, after a long and illustrious career, as the very symbol of Roman piety.

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<sup>24</sup> Marcus Tullius Cicero, “Philippic 2.”

<sup>25</sup> Gesine Manuwald, *Cicero* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014).

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