

The Reputation of L. Munatius Plancus and the Idea of “Serving the Times”

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Abstract: The evaluation of the career of L. Munatius Plancus has been inextricably bound up with the idea of “serving the times” – a phrase which Cicero once used in reference to him. But was survival through various political vicissitudes the chief virtue or achievement of Plancus? Did he see it that way? By putting Plancus back at the center of his own story, we can begin to see how his reputation was constructed in a complex process of competition and in-fighting with his contemporaries, as his peers critiqued his actions and he tried to defend and glorify them. Unpacking Plancus’ negative reputation ultimately proves to be an important part of reconstructing not only his career, but also the political discourse of the period.

Lucius Munatius Plancus has suffered from an overwhelmingly negative reputation in both ancient texts and modern scholarship. Yet his career – consul in 42 BCE, censor in 22, twice *imperator*, *triumphator*, and founder of colonies – was an impressive one, as the *elogium* on his tomb at Gaeta reminds us (*CIL* 10.6087).¹ His significant political position during this important transitional period in Roman history should prompt us to dig a little deeper into the details of his career and his reputation.

Assessments of Plancus’ career have been dominated, above all, by the idea that he was a “time-server.” In the crisis of late 44, Cicero wrote in a letter to Plancus that many thought him “too much at the service of the times”: *nimis servire temporibus* (*Cic. Fam.* 10.3.3 [SB 355]).² This phrase has become the standard against which Plancus has been evaluated. For instance, Nisbet and Hubbard wrote that “Nothing in Plancus’ career belies the general opinion cited by Cicero, *epist.* 10.3.3.”³ In their view, Horace’s positive presentation of Plancus in *Ode* 1.7 was to be attributed to poetic license, which did not stand up to what they termed the “cynical scrutiny of the Roman historian.”⁴ Syme’s synopsis of Plancus’ character is still the most memorable and scathing: “A nice calculation of his own interests and an assiduous care for his own safety carried him through well-timed treacheries to a

¹ All dates are BCE unless otherwise stated. His career: *RE* 16.1 (1933), “Munatius” no.30, col. 545-51 (Hanslik). Tomb and inscription: Fellman 1957; Osgood 2006, 276-80.

² This is the Loeb translation of Shackleton Bailey (2001). My own is offered below.

³ Nisbet and Hubbard 1970, 91; cf. Bliss 1960, 38-9.

⁴ Nisbet and Hubbard 1970, 94.

peaceful old age.”⁵ In contrast to these assessments, Watkins tried to rehabilitate his negative reputation, by arguing that Plancus’ “service” of the three most powerful men in Rome successively, Caesar, Antonius, and Octavian/Augustus, was proof of his abilities. To Watkins, Plancus represented “a type: the survivor, able to shift positions repeatedly and emerge on the winning side each time.”⁶ Nevertheless, Watkins retained the “time-server” language in his analysis. Concerning the correspondence between Plancus and Cicero, he wrote that Plancus was “polite but non-committal: in other words, time-serving.”⁷ Shortly afterwards, he softened his critique: “A fairer assessment of Plancus is that he worked to avoid a renewal of civil war and then to prevent its spread.”⁸ Thus, although Watkins acknowledged the rhetorical nature of much of our material concerning Plancus, his approach focused on viewing Plancus’ career in more positive terms, rather than deconstructing the rhetoric itself. However, rewriting the conventional representation of Plancus with a positive spin produces limited results in terms of understanding the wider political landscape of the age.

In order to deconstruct the rhetoric of Plancus’ reputation, and ground it in its historical context, it is necessary to do away with the English term “time-server” and its cognates as a convenient, but ultimately misleading, touchstone. In English, a “time-server” means someone who adapts their actions or views to the prevailing circumstances out of self-interest, but the Latin phrase *servire temporibus* has connotations which the English does not, because of the semantic range of *servire*, which is rooted in the Roman experience of slavery.⁹ Using the English concept obscures the conceptual framework. This is particularly important when analyzing the way Cicero employed the phrase in relation to Caesar’s dictatorship.

The negative material concerning Plancus, properly analyzed and contextualized, gives us an insight into some of the key issues of the political discourse of the 40s – 20s. These issues have tended to be overlooked by scholars as tangential to the key questions – or personalities – of the period. However, the various ways in which Romans of this rank negotiated the civil war is an issue of major significance. These people could be of great

⁵ Syme 1939, 165; similarly in *The Augustan Aristocracy* (1986, 30, 38, 110, 208, 322).

⁶ Watkins 1997, 2.

⁷ Watkins 1997, 4.

⁸ Watkins 1997, 4.

⁹ *OED* (2nd edn), “time-server,” “time-serving,” “serve.” On the relationship between slavery and *libertas* see Arena 2012, 14-30, 46-7.

value to the civil war victor, who had strong reasons to win them over; ultimately their participation helped to forge the principate.¹⁰

Cicero and Plancus Debate Current Politics

In December of 44 BCE, Plancus was engaged in governing the province of Transalpine Gaul. He had been in Rome in March, when he was present at the senatorial debate concerning Caesar's assassination (Plut. *Brut.* 19.1), but had set out for his province in time to campaign during the summer. By September he had achieved a victory against the Gauls and had been hailed by his troops as *imperator*. He had evidently reported these achievements to the Senate, hoping to have his acclamation as *imperator* recognized as the first step toward achieving a triumph. The honors for these victories were set to be debated in the Senate on 19 September, but the meeting was taken up instead by Antonius' response to Cicero's attack on 2 September.¹¹ Cicero learned ahead of time what Antonius intended, and decided to stay away. He wrote apologetically to Plancus that, if it had been safe to do so, he would have been there to support the motion for Plancus' honors, but he had to put his own safety first (Cic. *Fam.* 10.2.1 [SB 341]). Cicero tried to reassure Plancus that he would do everything possible to support his *dignitas* when he could.

Antonius left Rome on the night of 28 November to take control of the province of Cisalpine Gaul, which had been transferred to him by a vote of the assembly (surrounded by his soldiers) at the beginning of June.¹² Cicero's foremost concern at this point was whether anyone would forcefully resist Antonius' takeover of the province which was legally his. The person Cicero was pressuring most heavily was Decimus Brutus, the current governor. He exhorted him not to wait for the authorization of a Senate which was not yet free, but to act on his own initiative, as he had done in assassinating Caesar (Cic. *Fam.* 11.7.2 [SB 354]). Cicero was also writing to the other army commanders. His intention was to isolate Antonius and to build a coalition to oppose him.

It was at this juncture, around 9 December, that Cicero wrote the letter in question to Plancus (Cic. *Fam.* 10.3 [SB 355]).¹³ Apart from Decimus, Plancus was the closest

¹⁰ Welch 2012, 291-2.

¹¹ Cic. *Fam.* 12.2 [SB 344], 10.2 [341]; Shackleton Bailey 1977, vol. 2, 480

¹² App. *BC* 3.2, 27, 30; Cic. *Phil.* 1.6.

¹³ This is Shackleton Bailey's dating of the letter (1977, vol. 2, 495). White preferred a date in September or October of 44, as he saw the appeal to Plancus as less militarily urgent (2010, 151, 153). The fact that Cicero did not spell out that he wanted Plancus to resist Antonius militarily does not invalidate the idea that this was the

commander with the resources to fight Antonius. Cicero began his letter warmly with a recount of their interconnected family histories, and a reminder of the friendly regard he had always held for Plancus' career.¹⁴ The longstanding relationship provided a basis on which to build a difficult argument. Cicero also praised the successes Plancus had enjoyed in his career thus far. He credited him specifically with *virtus* and *fortuna*, and congratulated him for achieving success at a young age despite the *invidia* of others, which was only possible because of his *ingenium* and *industria*. However, past successes were not the point of the letter; Cicero needed to encourage Plancus to side with him now by holding out the hope of greater achievements in the future. His approach was to argue that, for true advancement, and true *dignitas*, Plancus needed to help to establish the best state of the *res publica* (*optimo rei publicae statu*, Cic. *Fam.* 10.3.2 [SB 355]).

The differentiation of true from false *dignitas* enabled Cicero to unpack the public perception of Plancus' career a little further.

Scis profecto (nihil enim te fugere potuit) fuisse quoddam tempus cum homines existimarent te nimis servire temporibus; quod ego quoque existimarem, te si ea quae patiebare probare etiam arbitrarer. sed cum intellegerem quid sentire, prudenter te arbitraber videre quid posses. nunc alia ratio est. omnium rerum tuum iudicium est idque liberum. consul es designatus, optima aetate, summa eloquentia, <in> maxima orbitate rei publicae virorum talium. incumbere, per deos immortalis, in eam curam et cogitationem quae tibi summam dignitatem et gloriam adferat; unus autem est, hoc praesertim tempore, per tot annos re publica divexata, rei publicae bene gerendae cursus ad gloriam. (Cic. *Fam.* 10.3.3 [SB 355])

You certainly know, for nothing could escape you, that there was a period when men thought you were enslaved to the times too much, which I also would have thought, if I had considered that you approved what you merely endured. But, comprehending your sentiments as I did, I considered that you wisely perceived what you were able to do. Now the case is altered. You will use your own judgement in all matters, and it will be free. You are consul-elect, in the prime of life, with the greatest eloquence, when the *res publica* has a great lack of such men. In heaven's name, devote your care and thought to that which will bring you the highest esteem and glory. There is only one way to glory, at this time particularly, when the *res publica* has been pulled apart for so many years: to administer the *res publica* well.

It is important to note that the reported criticism was one of degree: Plancus had been enslaved to the times *nimis* – too much. Cicero had been publicly expounding the idea that Caesar's dictatorship was a form of slavery for some time. In the first *Philippic*, delivered two months prior, he complained that while slavery had been unavoidable during Caesar's

response he was hoping to elicit. As White himself pointed out, the letters in this sequence “do not dwell on practical considerations” (2010, 154).

¹⁴ White 2010, 153; Cf. Rowland 1970, 197-8.

rule, the Roman people were now voluntarily enduring slavery by consenting to Antonius' tyranny (*Phil.* 1.15).¹⁵ Here, Cicero implied that Plancus could not have avoided being a slave of Caesar, as all were, yet some thought that he had done more than was strictly necessary to survive. The allegation was that Plancus had benefited. There are at least two aspects of Plancus' career to which Cicero may have been referring. The first is that Plancus had accepted one of Caesar's non-traditional urban prefectures in 45 (Dio 43.48), arguably (from the point of view of the detractors) for his own benefit. Thus, one criticism could be power hunger. Another possibility is that Plancus had profited financially from Caesar's rule. In a letter of 45 Cicero makes an offhand comment to Atticus that Plancus cannot be outbid on a property, implying that Plancus was very wealthy by this point (*Att.* 13.33.2 [SB 309]).¹⁶ It is conceivable that Plancus had increased his personal fortune substantially, first as a legate of Caesar in Gaul in the 50s, and then perhaps by buying up confiscated property cheaply during the civil war.¹⁷

The emphasis on Plancus' prior knowledge of these criticisms suggests that Cicero did not manufacture them for the occasion of the letter. In fact, Cicero used the reported charges to differentiate himself from Plancus' ill-wishers and to claim that he had always thought better of him. Cicero dwelt on the distinction between acquiescence and approval, and used this to argue that he had always known that Plancus was merely acquiescing. In Cicero's view, Plancus' recognition of the impossibility of challenging Caesar was wise. Significantly, this argument not only exculpated Plancus from his participation in Caesar's dictatorship, but also justified the assassination as being the only possible option in the circumstances.

All of this was merely preparing the ground for Cicero to make his appeal to Plancus about how to act in the current crisis. Cicero dismissed Plancus' previous history with one short sentence: "now the case is altered." Time is vitally important in this letter, as the argument relies on the juxtaposition of two specific periods. The first is the lifetime of Caesar, when Plancus quietly accepted his rule. The second is the present moment, when Plancus is consul designate and has the power to change the course of events. It is the comparison of Plancus' agency in these two situations which gives force to Cicero's argument. Cicero was implying that Plancus now had the military and political strength to

¹⁵ Cf. Cic. *Off.* 3.84.

¹⁶ The Plancus mentioned in this letter could also be his brother, L. Plotius Plancus.

¹⁷ Plancus in Gaul: Caes. *BG* 5.24.3, 25.4; fighting for Caesar in Spain in 49: Caes. *BC* 1.40.5.

strike out on his own. Specifically, he could declare his intention to oppose Antonius, even if the Senate did not authorize such an action. The magnitude of what Cicero was asking meant that he used all of his rhetorical finesse in composing the letter. His strategy was to mix some reservations about Plancus' past career and reputation with the promise of future greatness and glory. The criticisms were intended to be confronting enough to spur him to action, but not severe enough to alienate him.

Cicero's letter to Plancus is often read in isolation, but in fact we have Plancus' reply. His views on the developing situation, and on his own career, deserve just as much weight as Cicero's. Plancus' response to the letter was warm, but firm and methodical.¹⁸ He began with Cicero's discussion of their close relationship, but went one step further: he saw Cicero as a father figure, not just a friend (Cic. *Fam.* 10.4.2 [SB 358]). His next point picked up Cicero's entrée that he could judge things for himself: he reminded Cicero that he was using his judgment, and applying it to Cicero's letters as well as the situation. He responded to Cicero's insistence on the good fortune involved in his successes by focusing on the effort involved. Cicero had acknowledged Plancus' *industria*, but Plancus emphasized this further as *meus labor*. Most importantly, he turned Cicero's discussion of his critics on its head, claiming that while Cicero was perhaps overestimating his achievements because of friendship, even Plancus' worst personal enemies (*inimicissimi*) would acknowledge that all he lacked was a good reputation (*bona fama*) (Cic. *Fam.* 10.4.2 [SB 358]). Significantly, he was claiming that even if his career was seen in the worst possible light, it still only lacked public esteem; by implication, he must possess significant virtues and achievements. This argument was perhaps particularly pointed because Cicero, in his philosophical works, had repeatedly argued that good deeds in service of the state should be rewarded by *gloria*, even though this was not the primary aim of the ideal statesman.¹⁹ Plancus may have been alluding to Cicero's own ideas to cajole him into admitting that if he had done the good deeds which Cicero acknowledged then he deserved the corresponding respect. That Plancus could manipulate Cicero to this extent is plausible if we remember that he was a longtime friend, philosophically educated, and a clever orator.²⁰

¹⁸ Hall 2009, 180-1.

¹⁹ Cicero's preoccupation with the problematic nature of *gloria* had only increased since the assassination of Caesar. The lost *De Gloria* was written in June – July 44; *De Officiis*, written in October – November 44, grapples with the positives and negatives of the aristocratic obsession with *gloria*. See esp. Long 1995; Stone 2008; Morrell 2017, 252-68.

²⁰ White 2010, 158; Hall 2009, 181.

Plancus' polite rebuff was effective, and Cicero's reply, written in the middle of January, was more friendly (Cic. *Fam.* 10.5 [SB 359]). Thus, restoring the *nimis servire temporibus* letter to its context within the correspondence shows us that this was a two-sided exchange embedded in a specific historical moment. Cicero and Plancus debated Plancus' past career in the context of his next move. The argument was at times subtle – on Plancus' side perhaps more than Cicero's – but Cicero had a difficult brief: he did not want to alienate Plancus, so he was on the whole friendly and conciliatory, but he was also desperate, and wanted to use any means possible to secure military support against Antonius. The key strategy he adopted was to withhold praise so that there was something to which Plancus could aspire, and which he, the master orator, could provide. True *gloria* still lay ahead.

The Rhetoric of being a Slave of the Times

An instructive parallel with the language of the letter is the way Cicero talks about Lepidus in the *Fifth Philippic*, delivered before the Senate a few weeks later, on 1 January 43. In his proposal of honors for Lepidus, Cicero took the position that Lepidus, like Plancus, had always been the right sort of person, but that he had been powerless under Caesar's dictatorship.²¹ Cicero argued that Lepidus had always wished the Roman people to be free, as was evident from his groans and sad countenance at the Lupercalia, when Antonius publicly offered Caesar a diadem (Cic. *Phil.* 5.38).²² Lepidus' behavior on that day demonstrated that “his tolerance of what he had tolerated had been due to the necessity of the times rather than his own choice” (*quam illa quae tulerat temporum magis necessitate quam iudicio tulisset*, Cic. *Phil.* 5.38).²³ The basis of Cicero's argument was the same as that he used with Plancus: acquiescence is not the same as approval. In fact, Cicero had an even harder task applying this argument to Lepidus, who had been Caesar's *magister equitum*, but the attempt shows the line he was taking generally with such people, in public as well as in private. It provided a way for even Caesar's closest friends to be exculpated for their earlier actions; it was amnesty for Caesar's friends, as well as for the assassins.

In order to appreciate fully Cicero's rhetoric of slavery to the times in 43, we need to understand how he had already developed the idea in discussions of Caesar's march on Rome

²¹ The honors were a response to the peace settlement Lepidus had negotiated with Sextus Pompeius (Cic. *Phil.* 5.39-41).

²² See Manuwald 2007, 684-5.

²³ The decree specified that Lepidus had always hated monarchical rule (*dominatum regium*) (Cic. *Phil.* 5.40).

and his dictatorship.²⁴ In February of 49, while considering whether to join Pompeius in Greece or remain in Rome with Caesar, Cicero wrote to Atticus that there was merit to the example of L. Philippus, who had stayed in Rome during Cinna's domination, but joined Sulla when he returned. Philippus wisely recognized, "when it is necessary, be a slave of the times, but when your opportunity comes, don't let it go" (*cum sit necesse, servire tempori et non amittere tempus cum sit datum*, Cic. *Att.* 8.3.6 [SB 153]). By April, Cicero had decided that this kind of acquiescence to a would-be monarch was suitable for an equestrian like Atticus, but not for himself, an ex-consul and senator. Thus, he would leave and fight, but he advised Atticus that he should "in such a conflict support neither side openly, but be a slave of the times" (*ergo hac in contentione neutrum tibi palam sentiendum et tempori serviendum est*, Cic. *Att.* 10.7.1 [SB 198]). However, after the defeat of the republicans at Pharsalus, Cicero was prepared to acquiesce. In May of 46, Cicero wrote to Varro that he was being criticized for how easily he seemed to have accepted the Caesarian domination at Rome, and for associating too readily with his Caesarian friends. He responded to the charge: "So I go dining every night with our present rulers. What am I to do? One must be a slave of the times" (*itaque non desino apud istos qui nunc dominantur cenitare. quid faciam? tempori serviendum est*, Cic. *Fam.* 9.7.1 [SB 178]). By October, his frustration at being criticized for associating with Caesar's friends had increased, and he wrote to Aemilius Balbus: "I have done nothing in the way of being a slave of the times; with all of them I have friendships of long-standing," (*sed nihil est a me inservitum temporis causa, veteres mihi necessitudines cum his omnibus intercedunt*, Cic. *Fam.* 6.12.2 [SB 226]). He argued that he was not being opportunistic in asking for favors from them, because the friendships were not formed for this purpose. Thus in these letters Cicero had begun to use the phrase in the sense of benefiting, not just acquiescing.²⁵ The problem he faced was trying to determine the extent to which he could associate with Caesar and his friends without tarnishing his reputation. He was unequivocal in his belief that Caesar's dictatorship had made the Romans slaves, but even a slave had some choices, and he could be held accountable for them. Nevertheless, what is most prevalent in Cicero's writings from this period is his sense of powerlessness in the face of Caesar's autocracy. This is evidently why the metaphor of slavery seemed so apt.

²⁴ Cicero's earlier uses of the *servire temporibus* vocabulary do not all have the same pejorative tone, some are even positive. See Cic. *Verr.* 2.3.199; *Sest.* 14; *Cael.* 13; *Tusc.* 3.66, *QFr.* 1.2.4 [SB 2]. Cf. [Caes.] *BAlex.* 13.3; *Laus Pis.* 155; Petron. *Sat.* 97.5; Fronto *Ep.* 1.5.4.

²⁵ Thus my reading is more pointed than that of Hall (2009a, 109-10).

A similar argument concerning adapting to political circumstances is found in Cornelius Nepos' *Life of Atticus*.²⁶ Nepos does not use the exact idiom *servire temporibus*, but the closely related ideas of supporting the *causa temporibus* and being *temporarius* demonstrate a broader contemporary preoccupation with defending political behaviour against the charge of opportunism.²⁷ The theme looms large in the biography as Atticus was a prominent survivor of many political vicissitudes, and thus especially vulnerable to such an attack.²⁸ Nepos defends the practical aid Atticus gave to Fulvia when her husband Antonius was declared a *hostis* in 43 by arguing that "In so doing he could not be suspected by anyone of acting to benefit from the circumstances; for no one had any idea that Antonius would regain his power" (*quae cum faciebat, nemo eum temporis causa facere poterat existimare; nemini enim in opinionem veniebat Antonium rerum potiturum*, Nep. Att. 9.6). Atticus was, says Nepos, completely indifferent to circumstances; his belief was that one should be a friend to the person, not their fortunes (Nep. Att. 9.5). Yet the problem reappears two chapters later. "This one thing I wish to be understood, that his generosity was neither opportunistic nor calculated. This may be determined from the circumstances themselves and from the times, because he never bought the favour of those in power, but always assisted the unfortunate" (*illud unum intellegi volumus, illius liberalitatem neque temporariam neque callidam fuisse. id ex ipsis rebus ac temporibus iudicari potest, quod non florentibus se venditavit, sed afflictis semper succurrit*, Nep. Att. 11.3-4).²⁹ The biography labors the point. Atticus did not survive all of the political upheavals because he ingratiated himself to the powerful, but because he was a good man (Nep. Att. 11.6). This somewhat heavy-handed defense of Atticus is incredibly helpful, because it shows us how the moral argument in favor of the survivor was made at the time.

The charge of being "enslaved to the times too much" is far more revealing of the political discourse of the 40s than has been appreciated. It is a concept which brings to the fore all of the tensions surrounding Caesar's dictatorship and assassination, and how one should act in the face of immense power. Cicero's use of it in his letter to Plancus should not be taken as an insight into Plancus' character or *modus operandi*, but as the application of a

²⁶ The first draft was composed before 32, but the last four chapters were added later (Nep. Att. 19.1). On the importance of Nepos' *Atticus* for studying this time period see Millar 1988.

²⁷ Nepos was familiar with Cicero's letters (Nep. Att. 16.3-4), and it is possible that he was approaching his defense of Atticus with the Ciceronian material in mind. See also Brutteditius Niger's summary of Cicero's career (Sen. *Suas.* 6.21), which may show that this vocabulary had become particularly associated with Cicero.

²⁸ Welch 1996, 451-2, 470.

²⁹ Cf. Cic. *Parad.* 5.34; Nep. Att. 19.1-2.

rhetorical charge which was very much in the air at the time, and which could be applied to any survivor of the recent political upheavals.

Plancus as a Politician, 44-43 BCE

In Cicero's letter to Plancus, *nimis servire temporibus* meant quite specifically profiting from Caesar's dictatorship, as opposed to changing one's political opinions to suit the circumstances, or waiting to see which side seemed likely to win before declaring one's allegiance. At this point in December 43, Plancus had never changed sides. He had been with the elder Caesar all along, from his legateship in Gaul to the cusp of the consulship. Yet scholars have projected these alternative meanings back onto the letter by applying a particular interpretation of Plancus' actions later in 43. Specifically, the charge is that he held back from committing any decisive action until it was clear who would emerge the victor.

In order to understand Plancus' political decisions in 43, we need to go back to March 44, and what we know of his opinion on the direction the Senate should take after Caesar's assassination. Plutarch's *Brutus* (19.1) includes the detail that Cicero, Antonius, and Plancus all spoke in favor of amnesty for the assassins. This is the only source which mentions Plancus' speech, as the other sources are focused on the roles of Cicero and Antonius, yet it is likely that Plancus, an eminent praetorian and consul designate for two years hence, would have taken a leading part in the debate.³⁰ Many others who had been longstanding friends of Caesar also chose to support the amnesty and to protect the assassins.³¹ Even before this, Plancus had cultivated friendships on both sides of the civil conflict. In 46, he had helped Cicero in the matter of his friend C. Ateius Capito's claim to an inheritance (Cic. *Fam.* 13.29 [SB 282]). He was one of those who could act as a bridge between Caesar and those who had opposed him. Moreover, Plancus probably saw the wisdom of keeping Caesar's *acta* in place. This was a practical necessity which everyone agreed on at the time: if all of Caesar's decisions were annulled, there would be political chaos. That Plancus also benefited personally from this is clear. He had been designated consul by Caesar for 42, and he undoubtedly wanted to retain this. As he wrote to Cicero in late December of 44, "what is there to draw me in another direction?" (Cic. *Fam.* 10.4.2 [SB 358]). If he helped to keep the compromise arrangement of 17 March 44 in place, he would achieve the consulship. Still, it

³⁰ Cic. *Phil.* 1.1-2, App. *BC* 2.127-35, Plut. *Ant.* 14.1-2, Dio 44.22.2-34.6.

³¹ Welch 2012, 121-2.

is important not to underestimate the significance of Plancus' ongoing support of the amnesty. This political position became increasingly difficult to defend as attacks on it emerged from Dolabella, Antonius, and, eventually, the young Caesar.

After the Senate's declaration on 20 December 44 that the proconsuls should hold their provinces against Antonius, Plancus was slow to respond. When his dispatch finally arrived on 20 March 43, it was at odds with the message he sent in person through his legate C. Furnius (Cic. *Fam.* 10.6 [SB 370]). Publicly, he cautioned against a rash decision to go to war; privately, he told Cicero that he was preparing his legions and Gallic auxiliaries (Cic. *Fam.* 10.6 [SB 370]). Cicero was annoyed at the discrepancy between the two accounts, because Plancus would not yet support Cicero's position openly. Moreover, Plancus' advocacy of peace and noncommittal account of his own actions left the way open for Antonius to declare him a supporter. Antonius' letter to Hirtius and Caesar, quoted by Cicero in his *Thirteenth Philippic*, claimed that Plancus was a partner in his counsels and promised not to betray him (“—*nec Plancum prodere participem consiliorum,*” *Phil.* 13.44).³² There is no doubt that Antonius was petitioning all of the western proconsuls – and their armies – to join him.³³ Nevertheless, Antonius' claim is at odds with what Plancus wrote in his letters to Cicero, and the fact that Plancus did unambiguously declare his army for the Senate a month before the battle of Mutina. Plancus wrote outlining the aid he was bringing to the Senate's cause around 20 March (Cic. *Fam.* 10.8 [SB 371]); the dispatch was received and read in the Senate on 7 April, and Cicero began working immediately to have honors voted for Plancus (Cic. *Fam.* 10.12 [SB 377]).³⁴ Plancus later defended his secrecy in the early months of 43 by pointing to the example of Decimus Brutus, who had declared his intention to resist Antonius before he had made sufficient preparations to do so, and then suffered the consequences (Cic. *Fam.* 10.8.4 [SB 371]). Plancus wrote that he knew others would get more glory, because they had swiftly made large promises to the Senate, but he preferred to be cautious and to make sure he could deliver on his promises (Cic. *Fam.* 10.8.7 [SB 371]). He was well aware that his caution could be misconstrued as expediency.

³² Cicero's delivered speech probably included some rebuttal of Plancus' peace proposal, as well as Lepidus', but as Plancus clarified his readiness to fight soon afterwards, Cicero likely removed his response to Plancus' dispatch from the published version. See Ramsey 2010, 159-61.

³³ Syme 1939, 173, White 2010, 154.

³⁴ The battle took place on 21 April. Cicero reassured Plancus that the senate had received his dispatch well before it heard the news of how the battle had gone (Cic. *Fam.* 10.14.1 [SB 384]). Plancus did not hear the outcome until he crossed the Rhone at the end of April (Cic. *Fam.* 10.11.2 [SB 382]).

After Antonius' defeat at Mutina and flight into Gaul, Plancus' greatest problem was trying to work out how Lepidus would respond. Plancus, like Decimus, was suspicious that Lepidus would join Antonius as soon as their armies came into close proximity. He wrote anxiously to Cicero about his dilemma: whether to try to get to Lepidus first and shore up his loyalty, but risk being betrayed and surrounded, or to wait, but risk having to fight the combined forces of Lepidus and Antonius.³⁵ Lepidus' envoy to Plancus was Laterensis, who reassured Plancus that Lepidus could be held firm on the senatorial side. When Lepidus joined Antonius on 29 May, Laterensis was distraught at his mistake, and stabbed himself.³⁶

Plancus retreated across the river Isara and waited to be reinforced by Decimus, whom he was expecting within days (Cic. *Fam.* 10.23 [SB 414]). The mere fact that Plancus was willing to join his army with that of Decimus is of great significance. In encamping with his designated consular colleague, but a high-profile assassin of Caesar, Plancus made a public stand which neither Lepidus nor the young Caesar was now willing to make. This was the principle of the amnesty, agreed the year before, in action.

Lepidus' official dispatch to the Senate after he had joined Antonius demonstrates a very different approach and outcome. Lepidus blamed the soldiers for his change of side, claiming that they mutinied and compelled him to join Antonius (Cic. *Fam.* 10.35.1 [SB 408]). He defended himself by stressing his lack of agency; fortune had wrested the decision from his hands (Cic. *Fam.* 10.35.1 [SB 408]).³⁷ Similarly, the young Caesar's soldiers now apparently refused to assist Decimus, because they would not cooperate with an assassin of Caesar (Cic. *Fam.* 11.14.2 [SB 413]).³⁸ In contrast to both Lepidus and Caesar, Plancus worked hard to retain the allegiance of his troops, operating through Cicero in the Senate to get land grants for his soldiers (Cic. *Fam.* 10.24.2 [SB 428]). There is no indication in Plancus' letters that he would – or did – allow his decision-making to be swayed by his soldiers.³⁹

The last letter from Plancus is dated 28 July 43 (Cic. *Fam.* 10.24 [SB 428]). Plancus complained to Cicero at length that he kept writing to the young Caesar that he needed to come and reinforce them, but Caesar did nothing (Cic. *Fam.* 10.24.4 [SB 428]). A month

³⁵ Cic. *Fam.* 10.11 [SB 382], 10.15 [SB 390], 10.21 [SB 391], 10.18 [SB 395], 10.17 [SB 398].

³⁶ Hall 2009, 39.

³⁷ Osgood 2006, 57.

³⁸ Decimus complained to Cicero that “there is no giving orders to Caesar, nor *by* Caesar to his army” (Cic. *Fam.* 11.11.4 [SB 386]). Cf. App. *BC* 3.88.

³⁹ Cf. Cic. *Phil.* 10.18-19.

earlier, in desperation, he had already asked Cicero to urge Caesar to send him the legions, even if he would not come himself (Cic. *Fam.* 10.23.6 [SB 414]). By this point, they were all aware that the young Caesar was preoccupied with the idea of taking up the vacant consulship. In his last extant letter, Plancus told Cicero that while he was frustrated with Caesar's inaction, he still held some affection for him. He argued that this was only proper, given both Cicero's adamant support of the younger Caesar over the past year, and his own affection for the elder Caesar (Cic. *Fam.* 10.24.5 [SB 428]). Plancus was not afraid to remind Cicero that he had helped to maneuver the young Caesar into this position of power, and that it had been Caesar's reluctance to reinforce Decimus and himself that had given Antonius a chance to regain his strength (Cic. *Fam.* 10.24.5 [SB 428]). His final letter was a stinging critique of Caesar, and, by association, of Cicero.

Plancus' hopes that the young Caesar might still come to their aid were in vain. Only three weeks after he wrote this letter, on 19 August, Caesar's soldiers oversaw his election to the consulship at Rome. The younger Caesar had the assassins of the elder Caesar tried and convicted the next day. Dio narrates that Decimus learned of his condemnation by the Pedian court and decided to fight the young Caesar, but Plancus refused to join him (Dio 46.53.1-3).⁴⁰ Even after Lepidus' army had mutinied, the combined forces of Plancus and Decimus had stood their ground against Antonius and Lepidus for more than two months. It was the court proceedings which changed everything for Plancus, because his continued support of Decimus would now mean harboring a convicted criminal.⁴¹

Plancus did not change sides – the sides changed around him.⁴² In fact, his actions demonstrate a greater commitment to the principle of amnesty than many of the other commanders. Once the situation changed with the prosecution of the assassins and the rescinding of the *hostis* decrees against Antonius and Lepidus, Plancus submitted to the new legal reality, but he also allowed Decimus to escape with his army. Antonius was particularly

⁴⁰ Decimus was killed by a Gallic chieftain while attempting to reach M. Brutus in Macedonia (App. *BC* 3.97).

⁴¹ Cf. Livy *Per.* 120. Syme (1939, 179-80) insinuated that Plancus intended to defect to Antonius' side from the moment Lepidus did. The only sources which might support this interpretation are Plutarch's *Antony*, which states that Lepidus' decision caused Plancus to join them (Plut. *Ant.* 18.4) and Velleius 2.63.3, discussed below. The accounts of Dio and Appian are clearly to be preferred, as they fit with the chronology of the Ciceronian letters and grasp the seriousness of the assassins' conviction by the Pedian court. See Welch 2012, 145, 173.

⁴² Hall's failure to recognize the Pedian court as a factor led him to see Plancus handing over his legions to Antonius as a key step in facilitating the institution of the triumvirate and proscriptions (2009, 189). But by the time Pollio brought Plancus into negotiations with Antonius, the legal and political situation had already changed irrevocably. If Plancus refused to join the new coalition it would have meant opposing a consul (Caesar) and fleeing with the assassins. Hanslik pointed out that it would also have jeopardised his designated consulship (*RE* 16.1, 1933, "Munatius" no.30, col. 548).

angry at Plancus for not cooperating with him over the course of these months, and it took the mediation of Pollio to bring about a reconciliation (App. *BC* 3.96-7). Nevertheless, Plancus still had some bargaining power, probably in the form of his five legions and his Gallic cavalry. He managed to keep his designated consulship, and he was finally granted his triumph.

Velleius and Plancus' Reputation: Pathological Traitor

Plancus' welcome into the triumviral fold came at a price. His brother, L. Plotius Plancus, praetor in 43, was placed on the proscription list.⁴³ Each of the triumvirs and their main allies had to relinquish one close family member or friend: the young Caesar gave up Cicero, Antonius his uncle, Lepidus his brother, and Pollio his father-in-law.⁴⁴ Public horror at their decision to enact proscriptions and to proscribe close relatives against the dictates of *pietas* haunted all of these men for the rest of their lives. In Plancus' case, the memorable circumstances of his brother's death – his hiding place was discovered because of his perfume – contributed to the longevity of the story.⁴⁵ Velleius' discussion of Plotius' proscription is particularly noteworthy, because he blames Plancus personally for his brother's fate, claiming that Plancus had sufficient influence to have his brother proscribed (Vell. 2.67.3). Velleius narrates that this incident inspired the verse sung by the soldiers in Lepidus and Plancus' triumph: "Brothers-german our two consuls triumph over, not the Gauls" (*De germanis, non de Gallis duo triumphant consules*, Vell. 2.67.4). Elements of this story arouse suspicion: neither Plancus nor Lepidus was consul when they triumphed, separately, on 29 and 31 December 43, and Lepidus triumphed *ex Hispania*.⁴⁶ Moreover, Velleius singles out Antonius, Plancus, and Lepidus as those who broke sacred ties in proscribing their relatives, while passing over the similar involvement of Pollio, and attempting to exculpate the young Caesar for Cicero's death (Vell. 2.66.1-67.4).⁴⁷ The rhetorical and revisionist nature of this account of the proscriptions is clear. However, the

⁴³ Watkins (1997, 90-1, 93) argues that the reason for this was Plotius and the other praetors' armed opposition to the young Caesar's march on Rome.

⁴⁴ Welch 2012, 174.

⁴⁵ Vell. 2.67.4, Plin. *NH* 13.25, Val. Max. 6.8.5.

⁴⁶ Osgood 2006, 77; Watkins 1997, 93.

⁴⁷ The proscription of Pollio's father-in-law is noted by Appian (*BC* 4.12, 27), although he mistakenly says that this was because Pollio was one of the incoming consuls for the year.

passage also needs to be viewed in terms of Velleius' wider project of blackening Plancus' reputation.

Velleius breaks off from his narration of the lead up to the war of Actium to discuss Plancus' defection from Antonius' camp.⁴⁸ "In the midst of these preparations for war Plancus went over to Caesar, not through any conviction that he was choosing the right, nor from any love of the republic or of Caesar, for he was always hostile to both, but because he was a pathological traitor (*inter hunc apparatusum belli Plancus, non iudicio recta legendi neque amore rei publicae aut Caesaris, quippe haec semper impugnabat, sed morbo proditor*, Vell. 2.83.1). In the rest of the chapter Velleius heaps up further charges: Plancus was a groveling flatterer of Cleopatra, he would do anything for money, and he was the author of Antonius' worst decisions.⁴⁹ These accusations are given color by the anecdote that he danced the role of Glaucus the Nereid at a banquet, naked, but with his body painted blue.⁵⁰ Despite these memorable rhetorical flourishes, the most damaging charge is that Plancus betrayed Antonius in 32, following a lifelong pattern of treachery, and revealing a complete lack of political principle.

In arguing for Plancus' shameful betrayal, the passage also shows what reasons could be expounded in order to effect an honorable change of sides. First, the claim must be made that one was choosing the right cause.⁵¹ The second, perhaps easier, defense was that one acted out of affection – either love of country or love of a friend. Although the passage does not stipulate which of these reasons Plancus claimed – perhaps all of them – it does give us one indication of the specifics of his self defense. He claimed that the younger Caesar wanted him on his side because of his *virtus* (Vell. 2.83.2). In arguing against this, Velleius preserves the attempt. Moreover, the passage implies that Plancus argued that he had come to the realization that Antonius' actions were dishonorable. This accounts for Coponius' riposte to Plancus in the Senate meeting: Plancus had approved of all of Antonius' actions for many years, so if he now, belatedly, saw the error of his ways, that did not make him an honorable man (Vell. 2.83.3).⁵²

⁴⁸ On this passage: Syme 1939, 281, 511-12; Osgood 2006, 77, 278-9.

⁴⁹ Cf. Sen. *QNat.* 4A. Pr.5, for the fame of Plancus as a flatterer.

⁵⁰ See Scott 1933, 32, on the question of what historical event may lie behind this anecdote.

⁵¹ Cf. Messalla Corvinus' *sententia* about his political loyalties, having fought with Brutus at Philippi but Caesar at Actium: "Indeed, Caesar, I have always been on the better and more just side" (Plut. *Brut.* 53.3).

⁵² Woodman 1983, 218.

What were Antonius' "vilest acts", for which, according to Velleius, Plancus ought to have been held responsible? We know of one rumor that could fit this category. Plancus was accused of signing Sextus Pompeius' death warrant (App. *BC* 5.144).⁵³ Although it was M. Titius, Plancus' nephew, who put Sextus to death, one of the defenses for why he did this was that he had been following orders. The most obvious source of the order would be Antonius, but Appian reported a rumor that the final order had been given by Plancus (App. *BC* 5.144). Appian outlined the possibilities in detail, which gives more credence to the idea that the rumor was well known. Either Plancus (as governor of Syria) was authorized to sign and seal letters for Antonius, or he signed the order because Antonius did not want to give it himself (as Cleopatra was apparently favorable to Sextus Pompeius), or Plancus of his own volition decided to give the order to forestall further civil conflict (App. *BC* 5.144). The plausibility of the rumors is less important than their existence. Plancus could be blamed for things for which others would blame Antonius.

The only other instance of Velleius' use of the term *proditor* is in his discussion of the actions of Plancus and Pollio in 43. Velleius argues that Plancus' dubious loyalty and indecisive nature led him to pretend to cooperate with Decimus while ingratiating himself with the Senate, before "he again acted the traitor" (*mox eiusdem proditor*, Vell. 2.63.3). Velleius juxtaposes this with the conduct of Pollio, whom he characterizes as steadfast in his loyalty to the Julian party and his opposition to the Pompeians (*firmus proposito et Iulianis partibus fides, Pompeianis adversus*, Vell. 2.63.3). The terms of Plancus' characterization are similar to those at Vell. 2.83.1-3, a lack of *fides* and a propensity to treachery, but this passage outlines more clearly what exactly Plancus was seen to have betrayed: the Julian party. Velleius drew a stark line between those who supported "the Pompeian party" and those who supported "the Julian." Yet this was not the only, nor even the dominant, way of seeing politics in 43, particularly when amnesty was still the official policy.

The rhetoric can ultimately be traced back to Antonius himself, via his letter quoted in the *Thirteenth Philippic*.⁵⁴ Antonius insinuated that Hirtius and Caesar were obeying a "Pompeian Senate" and bringing into effect a distribution of power which would have pleased Gnaeus Pompeius himself (Cic. *Phil.* 13.26, 34). Equating the Senate with the former associates of Pompeius was a clever way to make Hirtius and Caesar reluctant to cooperate with it. The argument ultimately succeeded in splitting the fragile coalition. That Velleius, or

⁵³ Welch 2012, 282-3.

⁵⁴ Cf *Phil.* 5.32. Welch 2002, 9-15.

his source, was heavily influenced by this rhetoric is evident from 2.73.2, where he commented that the Senate in 43 was almost entirely made up of *Pompeiani*.⁵⁵

The most likely person to have applied this rhetoric to a retrospective of Plancus' career is Asinius Pollio.⁵⁶ Commentators have noted that the episodes which include the most severe criticism of Plancus couple this with high praise of Pollio.⁵⁷ At 2.63.3 they are juxtaposed directly: Plancus is criticized for disloyalty, but Pollio is commended for his *fides*. In Velleius' account of the Perusine War, Plancus is blamed for promising aid but not delivering; Pollio is praised for his many brilliant exploits (2.74.3-4, 76.2).⁵⁸ Wright argued that Velleius' ultimate source was probably the speeches which Pollio wrote attacking Plancus, which were to be published after the latter's death, and which were still extant at the time of Pliny (*HN* 1.Pr.31).⁵⁹ If Velleius' text provides a good indication of the nature of Pollio's attack on Plancus, then Pollio not only brought all of his rhetorical skills to bear on the task of tarnishing Plancus' career, but also used the opportunity to defend his own conduct by adducing his own unwavering opposition to the "Pompeian" cause.

The idea of betrayal became an increasingly important aspect of political rhetoric in the triumviral period as various leaders and causes rose and fell. M. Messalla Corvinus' quip that Q. Dellius was the *desultor* ("horse-vaulter") of the civil wars, because he deserted from Dolabella to Cassius, then Antonius, then Caesar, encapsulates the integrity problem with which the survivors were faced (*Sen. Suas.* 1.7). The image reduced the civil wars to a spectacle and stripped all of the participants of honor and conviction. This imagery was perhaps the logical outcome of limiting the civil wars to a matter of friendships and betrayals.

Plancus' Actions in 32 BCE

Ultimately, it is unclear why Plancus deserted Antonius in 32.⁶⁰ The sources allege friction with either Cleopatra or Antonius, and give several potential causes for each, ranging

⁵⁵ Welch 2002, 2-3.

⁵⁶ The fortunes of the *Munatii Plancii* in Velleius' time should also be considered as contributing to his negative portrait (see Morello 1997, 61-2) Nevertheless, at least some of the specifics of the political charges reported in Velleius can be traced back to triumviral/early Augustan politics.

⁵⁷ See esp. Wright 2002.

⁵⁸ The alleged indecisiveness of Plancus in the Perusine War should also be reconsidered. See Welch 2012, 229.

⁵⁹ Wright 2002; cf. Osgood 2006, 77.

⁶⁰ Osgood 2006, 279, 353; Morello 1997, 47-9; Ferriès 2007, 278-80, 443.

from the idea that Plancus had been opposed to Cleopatra joining the expedition, to the idea that Antonius had found him out in some financial mismanagement.⁶¹

One common scholarly explanation for Plancus' change of sides in 32, following Syme, is that Plancus calculated which side was on the ascendant.⁶² Yet this gives rather too much credit to Plancus' foresight, while also minimizing his role in *making* Caesar's the winning, or the "right," side. Plancus and his nephew Titius left Antonius' camp in Athens and returned to Rome in the summer of 32, at a time when the young Caesar's fortunes were arguably at one of their lowest points. The consuls had fled Rome at the beginning of the year in the wake of Caesar's aggressive response to their criticisms of him, and Caesar's position in Rome was looking increasingly autocratic. It was Plancus and Titius' actions in revealing the contents of Antonius' will, including his intended burial in Alexandria, which gave fresh impetus to Caesar's attack on Antonius, and arguably provided much of the ammunition which allowed Caesar to claim the moral high ground.⁶³ Now there was irrefutable evidence that Antonius had abandoned his Roman ways and had been lost to the decadent eastern influence of Cleopatra.⁶⁴ Even then, not all of Antonius' friends (in Rome or abroad) abandoned him.

To put this in Ciceronian terms, in this situation Plancus did have agency, and he used it to support the side of Caesar. The young man he had railed against to Cicero in 43 was now, for whatever reason, the better option. This time the irrevocable decision was made more than a year before the battle finally took place. Plancus returned to Rome and the Senate; he was now one of the highest ranking ex-consuls. In the Senate he defended his conduct with the same moral arguments he had used in the crisis of 43: his own integrity and merit.

In Horace's *Ode* 1.7, addressed to Plancus, the vital moment when Plancus left Greece is characterized not as a betrayal, but as a sad realization of the false promise that Antonius represented, which was already transitioning in Plancus' case into hope for a return to his true Italian home.⁶⁵ As Moles demonstrated, "for his change of allegiance Plancus is praised and assimilated within the Augustan programme, the praise being actually enhanced

⁶¹ Dio 50.3; Plut. *Ant.* 63; Vell. 2.83.

⁶² Syme 1939, 281; Watkins 1997, 103, 105-6; cf. Osgood 2006, 278; Moles 2002, 103.

⁶³ Dio 50.3-5, Plut. *Ant.* 58.2-4; Osgood 2006, 353-4 An alternative view of the will's significance is given by Woodman (1983, 217).

⁶⁴ Scott 1933, 41-3, 49.

⁶⁵ My argument here follows the masterful interpretation of the *Ode* by Moles (2002, with discussion of earlier readings).

by implicit allusions to Plancus' disreputable Antonian past, which Plancus is represented as having heroically surmounted."⁶⁶ The choice Plancus had to make was a Herculean one: the path of virtue rather than the path of vice. The *Ode* was undoubtedly meant to be complimentary to Plancus, and to engage with his own character and interests. Thus, the *Ode* further supports the argument that Velleius indirectly preserves some of Plancus' own justification: he had chosen the path of *virtus*.

Plancus' thoughtful conversion to the cause of the young Caesar made it all the more meaningful that he was the one to bring the motion in January 27 for the new honorific name "Augustus."⁶⁷ It was also entirely appropriate for Plancus to be the spokesman because he was one of the most senior consulars. Yet his participation in this historic moment was really a footnote to a long and complex career, one which helped to forge, as much as it was forged by, the circumstances of the age.⁶⁸

Conclusion

This study has shown the value of moving beyond the pithy characterizations of Plancus, adapted from Cicero and Velleius, which have dominated so much of the scholarship on his career. Reproducing the rhetoric of our sources indiscriminately does not make for good history. Nonetheless, one must also avoid the pitfall of dismissing negative rhetoric completely. In this case, the charges against Plancus give us an insight into some of the ideas which really mattered in civil war politics, such as agency and culpability, and how Plancus engaged with them. A lot can be learned even from a largely unsympathetic tradition.

We can trace two distinct debates in the political rhetoric which contributed to the construction of Plancus' reputation: the first was concerned with adapting oneself to Caesar's power, while the second was concerned with *fides* towards Antonius and other triumviral political leaders. Drawing the distinction between the two lines of argument brings us much closer not only to understanding Plancus, but also to reflecting accurately the wider political situation, in all its complexity. Moreover, it allows us to appreciate the involvement of people like Plancus, Pollio, and Messalla in the creation and development of the rhetoric.

⁶⁶ Moles 2002, 90-1. Cf. Welch's argument that Messalla Corvinus' continued commitment to the memory of Brutus fulfilled a similar function (2009).

⁶⁷ Suet. *Aug.* 7.2, Vell. 2.91, Dio 53.16.6-8.

⁶⁸ His last political office was the censorship of 22 (Dio 54.2.1; Suet. *Nero* 4).

Plancus was a more significant political player than is often recognized, with a complicated career and complicated opinions. Tracing what Plancus actually did, not just what was said about him, is one way to go beyond the rhetoric. Another is to recognize and take seriously his own contributions to the dialogue. One can do so through a careful reading of Plancus' political arguments in his letters to Cicero, giving them equal weight to Cicero's own, or through trying to see the Roman world from Plancus' perspective, as one can still do by visiting his mausoleum on the promontory at Gaeta.⁶⁹ Plancus' career was, after all, a success story which could be encapsulated in an inscription which listed, in traditional fashion, all of his services to the state. The *elogium* was the final way of trying to ensure that he got some credit for his labors.

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⁶⁹ For the mausoleum as a response to his critics, see Osgood 2006, 279-80.

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