Francis Bacon: “Of Youth and Age” (1625)

Directions: read Bacon’s essay, then fully and thoroughly and analytically answer the questions that follow it.

EDITOR’S INTRODUCTION: Francis Bacon, the first major English essayist, published three versions of his Essayes or Counsels, Civil and Moral (1597, 1612, and 1625). The third edition has endured as the most popular of his many writings. Professor Brian Vickers has pointed out that Bacon could "vary the tempo of argument in order to highlight important aspects." In the essay "Of Youth and Age," Vickers notes that Bacon "uses a most effective variation in tempo, now slowing down, now speeding up, together with syntactical parallelism, in order to characterize the two opposed stages of life." (Introduction to the Oxford World's Classics edition of The Essays Or Counsels, Civil and Moral (1999).

“Of Youth and Age,” by Francis Bacon (1625)

A man that is young in years may be old in hours, if he have lost no time. But that happeneth rarely. Generally, youth is like the first cogitations, not so wise as the second. For there is a youth in thoughts, as well as in ages. And yet the invention of young men is more lively than that of old; and imaginations stream into their minds better, and as it were more divinely. Natures that have much heat and great and violent desires and perturbations, are not ripe for action till they have passed the meridian of their years; as it was with Julius Caesar, and Septimius Severus.

Of the latter of whom it is said, Juventutem egit erroribus, imo furoribus, plenum¹. And yet he was the ablest emperor, almost, of all the list. But reposed natures may do well in youth. As it is seen in Augustus Caesar, Cosmus Duke of Florence, Gaston de Foix, and others. On the other side, heat and vivacity in age is an excellent composition for business. Young men are fitter to invent than to judge; fitter for execution than for counsel; and fitter for new projects than for settled business.

For the experience of age, in things that fall within the compass of it, directeth them; but in new things, abuseth them. The errors of young men are the ruin of business; but the errors of aged men amount but to this, that more might have been done, or sooner.
Young men, in the conduct and manage of actions, embrace more than they can hold; stir more than they can quiet; fly to the end, without consideration of the means and degrees; pursue some few principles which they have chanced upon absurdly; care not to innovate, which draws unknown inconveniences; use extreme remedies at first; and that which doubleth all errors, will not acknowledge or retract them; like an unready horse, that will neither stop nor turn.

Men of age object too much, consult too long, adventure too little, repent too soon, and seldom drive business home to the full period, but content themselves with a mediocrity of success. Certainly it is good to compound employments of both; for that will be good for the present, because the virtues of either age may correct the defects of both; and good for succession, that young men may be learners, while men in age are actors; and, lastly, good for extern accidents, because authority followeth old men, and favour and popularity youth. But for the moral part, perhaps youth will have the pre-eminence, as age hath for the politic. A certain rabbin, upon the text, *Your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams,* inferreth that young men are admitted nearer to God than old, because vision is a clearer revelation than a dream. And certainly, the more a man drinketh of the world, the more it intoxicateth; and age doth profit rather in the powers of understanding, than in the virtues of the will and affections. There be some have an over-early ripeness in their years, which fadeth betimes. These are, first, such as have brittle wits, the edge whereof is soon turned; such as was Hermogenes the *rhetorician,* whose books are exceeding subtle; who afterwards waxed stupid. A second sort is of those that have some natural dispositions which have better grace in youth than in age; such as is a fluent and luxuriant *speech,* which becomes youth well, but not age: so Tully saith of Hortensius, *Idem manebat, neque idem decebat*\(^2\). The third is of such as take too high a strain at the first, and are magnanimous more than tract of years can uphold. As was Scipio Africanus, of whom Livy saith in effect, *Ultima primis cedebant*\(^3\).

\(^1\) He passed a youth full of errors, yea of madnesses.  
\(^2\) He continued the same, when the same was not becoming.  
\(^3\) His last actions were not equal to his first.
1. List the positive attributes Bacon assigns to both youth and age. Does he prefer one stage over another? How can you tell? Explain.

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2. Bacon’s title suggests that his essay will compare and contrast youth with age. Locate two or three sentences that contain a comparison and describe the words or phrases Bacon uses to emphasize his point of similarity or contrast.

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3. Bacon uses the rhetorical mode of classifying and dividing to analyze his two main categories. Consider his classification of youth who “have an over-early ripeness in their years” in the final sentences, and discuss whether these subcategories still exist today. How might his descriptions be updated.

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4. BONUS: write your own short and well-balanced essay that contrasts youth and age (2-3 pages, on separate paper)