M. Porcius Cato to Cicero

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.15353/et.v1i1.6794

On the sixth day before the Ides of April, in the 708th year after the founding of Rome[1]

As you once called upon me to defend you against Clodius, and later to uphold your victories to the senate, I now call upon you and our friendship in return. Here in Utica, standing before failure, I reflect not in sorrow, but in duty. Was there a path, however narrow, that might have averted catastrophe?

I am writing to you now at greater length than ever before, for I wish there to be an account of the truth as I see it that is unmarred by ambition.[2]

From the beginning, I foresaw the tyrant approaching. Years ago, it was I who opposed Caesar and his bill to divide Campania, and for this he dragged me from the tribunal to prison, hoping I would beg and debase myself. When I did not yield, he resented me more.[3] Since then, he and Pompey rose, both men consumed by ambition; their own failed alliance proved it. When I was asked to give my opinion on the conspirators of Catiline, I implored the Senate to punish them with the full might of the law, to penalize them in the same way our ancestors would have.[4] Caesar, who had been enraged by this call for justice, refused to attend the Senate until your consulship was finished. Many praised his clemency, but I only saw a man willing to defend mutiny. Caesar already had the makings of another Catiline.[5]

He has since tightened his grip on our Republic. For nothing but his own glory, he began an illegal war in Gaul. While many of us called his ambition for what it was, others celebrated him. I stood against Caesar myself in that final bid for consulship, unplagued by the disease of bribery. You told me then – as many did–that this was a mistake, and there would be no path to victory against his deceit.[6] Even with the gift of hindsight, I do not regret my actions, lamenting only their failure.

Yet, I do regret my conduct towards you. Consumed by my rivalry with Caesar, I demanded you oppose him as openly as I did. I deemed you duplicitous. Upon reflection, perhaps it was

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[1] April 5th, 46 BCE

[2] Cicero, Marcus Tullius. *Cicero's Letters to His Friends. M. Porcius Cato to Cicero (In Cilicia).*

[3] Plutarch, *Cato Minor* 33.2-4.

[4] Sallust, *Conspiracy of Catiline,* 52.13; This could be a reference to *mos maiorum*, which he refers to later in the letter. His family has consistently held up this idea of Roman ideals since Cato the Elder.

[5] Cf. Drogula 2019, 78-79.

[6] Plutarch, *Cato Minor* 50.2.

not defiance that could have preserved Rome, but temperance.[7] Battle hastened her fall, and your reasoned voice may well have steadied her longer.

I have also opposed Pompey, believing he lacked integrity. Though, when forced to choose, I sided with him, believing he could uphold the law. He failed us and Rome. He never wished for her lawful restoration. At Dyrrhachium, while he celebrated victory, I wept for those that had fallen for the despotic ambition of two men.[8]

After Pharsalus, I held onto the hope that he escaped and sought to rally our remaining forces. I had offered you command of these legions, but you, ever the moderate, declined and returned to Rome.[9] Some might call it cowardice, I do not. I commend your desire to return to our noble Republic and find some way to protect her from within. I, instead, followed Scipio into Africa, though I knew that victory under him would bring little more virtue than defeat under Caesar.

Now, through a series of events I wish not to relive, I am held here, in Utica.

Not long ago, I received word of Scipio's defeat at Thapsus as the news spread chaos through the ranks. I feared that some might attempt to flee, but I did my best to calm them. Caesar, for all his faults, is not needlessly cruel. I told my men, if they remain united until the end, he would be more willing to grant leniency when asked for pardon.[10] Though, while they are free to choose that path, I will not do the same.

I have weighed every course and see no true road of dignity. I even considered living the rest of my days in exile–as far from Caesar as I could manage–but I cannot bear a life where I am left powerless while my Rome falls from her former glory. If I wished it, he would spare me, though he would do so more for his own sake than mine. I will again deny him the satisfaction of begging for my freedom. I cannot suffer his mercy any more than his wrath.

As I take this path, I have found counsel in Plato's On the Soul, as Socrates himself faced his death with conviction.[11] If the soul is truly immortal, then death is no defeat.[12] I told my son: I,

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[7] Drogula 2019, 283-85.

[8] Plutarch, *Cato Minor* 54.11; Weeping from such a prominent Stoic is unusual, but Plutarch does mention it, as well as his emotional reaction when his half-brother passed away, suggesting that Cato, as much as he might have wanted to live the Stoic ideals, still had human emotions.

[9] Plutarch, *Cato Minor* 55.6.

[10] Plutarch, *Cato Minor* 59.6-7.

[11] Plutarch, *Cato Minor* 68.2.

[12] Plato, *Phaedo ("On the Soul").*

who have grown up under freedom, cannot suffer slavery in my old age, I cannot learn to endure it. He may still learn to be content, if he can forgive the failures of his father.[13]

I wish not to leave him, but I take solace in knowing he is now a man grown, not a child in need of paternal guidance. I was not granted such a fortune. My father left me too soon, so I sought guidance in Rome herself, her laws, traditions, and unyielding spirit. To continue now, lingering in exile, would be an axe to the threads that have tied me to the city that raised me. Watching her, I find myself feeling much the same as when my brother died, without hope or meaning.

If our Republic must perish, so must I.

Our Rome, while under tyrannical rule, must maintain some part of herself. Mos maiorum has governed both you and me and cannot be relinquished so readily. The burden of preserving what little remains now rests with you. I trust in you now to continue to be a voice of moderation and restraint. Though I carry regrets, I do not fear my end. I have conducted myself true to the values of a Roman. Only the gods may judge me now.

Farwell, my friend. May you find the path that has eluded me.

[13] Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 43.10.5.

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