

LETTER

Dante Alighieri (c. 1265–1321)

to Henry VII (1275–1313), King of the Romans (1308–1313)

16 April 1311

The feet of the most holy conqueror and excellent master, Lord Henry,¹ by divine providence King of the Romans, always august, are kissed by his most devoted servant Dante Alighieri, a Florentine and undeservedly an exile, and all Tuscans everywhere, who desire the public peace.

Bearing witness to the boundless love of God, peace was left to us as a heritage, that in its wonderful sweetness the hardships of our warfare might be assuaged, and that in its practice we might merit the joys of the triumphant Kingdom of Heaven. But the malignity of the ancient and implacable foe, which is forever privily lying in wait for human prosperity, after dispossessing those who freely consented, has impiously despoiled us against our will, through the absence of our protector. Hence long have we wept by the streams of confusion, and we have implored without ceasing the protection of the Just King that he would overthrow the satellites² of the savage tyrant and re-establish us in our rights. And when you, successor of Caesar and Augustus, crossing the summits of the Apennines, brought back the venerated Tarpeian ensign, forthwith our deep sighs ceased, and the floods of tears subsided; and, rising like the sun that is eagerly longed for, a new hope of a better age shone upon Latium. Then many, anticipating the accomplishment of their prayers, in their rejoicing sang with Virgil of the reign of Saturn and of the return of the Virgin.

But because our sun (whether the fervor of desire or the semblance of truth suggests this) is now believed to tarry, or is supposed to have turned back in his course, as if Joshua³ or the son of Amoz⁴ commanded him anew, we are compelled by uncertainty to doubt, and to break forth in the words of the precursor thus: “Are you he that should come? Or look we for another?”⁵ And although the long thirst in its violence casts doubt, as is its wont, on those things which are certain on account of their nearness, none the less we trust and hope in you, protesting that you are the ambassador of God, the son of the Church, and the promoter of Roman glory. For, in truth, I, who write as much for myself as for others, saw you most gracious, as beseems imperial majesty, and heard you most clement when my hands touched your feet and my lips paid their debt. Then my spirit gloried in you, and silently I said within myself, “Behold the Lamb of God, which takes away the sin of the world!”⁶

But we marvel what sluggishness delays you so long, since, now for some time a victor in the valley of the Po, you forsake, overlook, and neglect Tuscany as though you believed the rights of the empire to be protected by you were circumscribed by the boundaries of Liguria; not fully understanding, as it seems to us, that the power of the Romans is limited neither by the confines of Italy, nor by the shores of three-horned Europe. For although through violence its dominions may have been narrowed on all sides, none the less, since it extends to the waves of Amphitrite by inviolable right, it barely deigns to be girded round about by the ineffectual billows of the ocean. For to us it was written:

Of illustrious origin shall Trojan Caesar be born:

His empire shall end with the ocean; his fame with the stars.⁷

And if when Augustus decreed that all the world should be taxed (as our Evangelist, allegorically a bull,⁸ kindled by the divine flame, bellows) the edict had not gone forth from the court of a most just sovereignty, the

¹ Henry VII (1275–1313), Count of Luxembourg (1288–1313), King of the Romans (1308–1313), and Holy Roman Emperor (1312–1313)

² The Guelphs, who supported extension of Papal power at the expense of the Emperor

³ Joshua 10:1–15

⁴ The prophet Isaiah (see II Kings 20:1–11)

⁵ John the Baptist (see Luke 7:19–20)

⁶ John 1:29

⁷ Vergil, *Aeneid* 1:286

only begotten Son of God, made man to declare himself subject to the decree according to his assumed nature, would not have been willing to have been born of the Virgin at that time; for surely He whom it behoved to fulfill all righteousness would not have counseled an unrighteous deed.

Therefore let it shame him whom all the world awaits to be ensnared so long in such a narrow corner of the earth, and let it not result from the caution of Augustus that the Tuscan tyranny is strengthened in the confidence of delay, and that day by day, by encouraging the insolence of the wicked, it gathers new force, heaping rashness on rashness. Once more let the voice of Curio to Caesar thunder forth:

While parties tremble, only weakly united,
Delay not; a man prepared should never dally.
Labor and fear are both dearly bought.⁹

Let that voice of chiding again thunder from the clouds to Æneas:

If the glory of such a destiny moves you not,
If for your own fame you toil not,
Think on the young Ascanius—your heir, your hope, Iulus,
To whose kingdom belong Italy and the land of Rome.¹⁰

For in truth, King John,¹¹ your royal heir, whom the succeeding generation of the world awaits after the setting of the sun that now is rising, is another Ascanius who, following in the footsteps of his great father, will rage like a lion against the followers of Turnus wheresoever they are, and towards the Latins will become as gentle as a lamb. Let the lofty counsels of the holiest of kings look to this, that the heavenly judgment may not again sound bitter in these words of Samuel, “When you were little in your own sight, were you not made the head of the tribes of Israel, and the Lord anointed you King over Israel? And the Lord sent you on a journey, and said, Go and utterly destroy the sinners the Amalekites.”¹² For you also have been consecrated king, that you may smite Amalek and may not spare Agag, and that you may avenge him that sent you, on a brutal people, and for their hasty rejoicing; which, of a truth, Amalek and Agag are said to signify.

You waste the spring as well as the winter at Milan; and do you think to slay the baleful hydra by striking off its heads? If you should read the mighty deeds of the glorious Alcides, you would see that you are deceived even as was he, before whom the venomous animal grew with each loss, his head sprouting forth anew into many, until he of the great heart vigorously attacked the seat of life. Not even for killing trees is the lopping of their branches sufficient; nay, so long as their roots are sound that they may yield nourishment, their branches will multiply more lustily than ever.

What will you, the sole ruler of the world, proclaim that you have accomplished when you have bowed the head of refractory Cremona? Will not the madness of Brescia or Pavia be then suddenly inflamed? Aye, in truth. And anon, when again the scourge shall cease to be plied, it will soon arise at Vercelli, at Bergamo, or elsewhere, until the radical cause of this abundant growth is removed, and, the root of so great a frenzy being torn out, trunk and thorny branches dry up together.

Do you not know, perchance, O most excellent of princes! (nor can you see from the height of such majesty) where this stinking fox lies, safe from the hunters? Forsooth the catiff drinks neither in the waters of the precipitous Po nor in those of your Tiber, but the streams of the Arno thus poison his lips, and Florence (do you perchance know it not?) is this dire evil called. This is the viper that darts at the bowels of its mother; this is the sick sheep that contaminates the flock of its master by contact; this is the accursed and impious Myrrha, who

⁸ In writing, painting, and sculpture throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance, the Four Evangelists were commonly depicted by an Angel or Child (Matthew), a Lion (Mark), a Bull (Luke), and an Eagle (John). See Ezekiel 1:1–14 and Revelation 4:6–9.

⁹ Lucan, *Pharsalia* 1:280

¹⁰ Vergil, *Aeneid* IV:272–276

¹¹ John (1296–1346), King of Bohemia

¹² I Samuel 15:17–18

becomes inflamed with passion in the embraces of her father, Cinyras; this is that impetuous Amata who, when the fated nuptials were denied, was not afraid to take to herself a son-in-law whom the fates forbade, incited him to carry on the war fiercely, and at length, paying the penalty of her wicked temerity, hanged herself in a halter. In very truth, she strives to rend her mother into pieces with the ferocity of a viper, when against Rome, who fashioned her after her own pattern and likeness, she sharpens the horns of rebellion. In very truth from her evaporating corruption she exhales an infectious smoke, and thence the neighboring flocks all unconscious waste away, while she attaches the neighbors to herself by seducing them with lies and flatteries, and infatuates the allies. In very truth she glows with lust for the incestuous embraces of her father, when she endeavors with shameless effrontery to violate against you the agreement of the Supreme Pontiff, father of fathers. In very truth she resists the commandments of God; while worshipping the idol of her own will, and spurning the legitimate king, she is not ashamed, mad that she is in her power of doing evil, to barter rights that are not hers with a king¹³ not hers. And thus the infuriate woman awaits the halter with which she is to bind her neck; for often one is betrayed into evil passions, that so betrayed he may do those things that are not seemly. And although these deeds may be unjust, nevertheless the punishments that follow are recognized to be just.

Up then, noble child of Jesse, take courage from the eyes of the Lord God of Sabaoth, in whose presence you are to act; and overthrow this Goliath with the sling of your wisdom and with the stone of your strength, for at his fall night and the shadow of fear will cover the camp of the Philistines, the Philistines will flee, and Israel will be set at liberty.¹⁴ Then our heritage, deprived of which we weep without ceasing, will be restored to us in its entirety. And as now, while exiles in Babylon we lament in remembering holy Jerusalem, so then, as citizens, and breathing in peace, with gladness shall we call to mind the miseries of turmoil.

Written in Tuscany, near the springs of the Arno, on the sixteenth of April 1311, the first year of the descent into Italy of the divine and most fortunate Henry.

Charles Sterrett Latham, *A Translation of Dante's Eleven Letters* (Houghton Mifflin: Boston, 1891):150—159.

¹³ Robert, King of Naples

¹⁴ I Samuel 17