

# LETTER

Dante Alighieri (c. 1265–1321)

to Guido II da Polenta (–1330), Lord of Ravenna (1316–1322)

Venice, 30 March 1314

I should have expected to see anything but what I have actually seen and discovered of the quality of this magnificent state. “Presence lessens glory,” if I may make use of that passage of Vergil.<sup>1</sup> I had imagined to myself that I should find here those noble, magnanimous Catos and those rigid censors of depraved customs—in short, all that they, assuming a most pompous manner, would have unhappy and afflicted Italy believe that they represent in themselves. Do they not cause themselves to be called “lords of all, a togated race?”<sup>2</sup> A miserable and mis-guided people are you truly, so insolently oppressed, so vilely governed, and so cruelly vexed by these upstarts, destroyers of the ancient laws and authors of most wicked corruptions.

But what shall I tell you, my Lord, of the obtuse and brutal ignorance of such grave and venerable fathers? On entering the presence of such a mature and white-haired college, I wished, in order not to abuse both your greatness and my authority, to perform my office and your embassy in that tongue which with the empire of beautiful Ausonia has continually gone on declining and always will decline; believing, perchance, to find it seated in its majesty in this most distant corner, hereafter to be spread with the power of this state through the length and breadth of Europe at least.

But alas, I could not have been a more strange and unknown pilgrim had I but just come from extreme and western Thule.<sup>3</sup> Nay, I could have found here interpreters for my foreign idiom far more readily had I come from the fabulous Antipodes than when I was hearkened to with the eloquence of Rome on my lips; for I had no sooner pronounced the part of my exordium that I had composed in your name in felicitation on the recent election of this most serene Doge,<sup>4</sup> “Light is sown for the righteous, and gladness for the upright in heart”<sup>5</sup> than one was sent to tell me that I should either seek out some interpreter or change my mode of speech. Thus between astonishment and scorn, I know not which the more, I began to say a few words in that tongue which I have used from what time I was in swaddling-clothes, which was but little more familiar and natural to them than the Latin had been.

Therefore, instead of carrying them joy and delight, I sowed in a field so fertile in ignorance the most abounding seeds of wonder and confusion. But that they do not understand the Italian speech is not at all a matter of wonder since, descended from Greek and Dalmatian progenitors, they have brought to this delectable land nothing but the worst and most shameful customs, together with the mire of all unbridled lasciviousness. Wherefore it has seemed good to me to give you these short tidings of the embassy that I have executed in your name, praying that, although you have every authority to command me, it may never again please you to send me on a like emprise, from which you can at no time hope for fame nor I for consolation. I will remain here a few days to feast my bodily eyes, which are naturally greedy of the novelty and pleasure of this place; and then I will return to my sweetest haven of rest, so graciously embraced by your royal courtesy.

Charles Sterrett Latham, *A Translation of Dante's Eleven Letters* (Houghton Mifflin: Boston, 1891):160—163.

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<sup>1</sup> The passage is actually from Claudian, *De Bello Gildonico* V:385

<sup>2</sup> Vergil, *Aeneid* 1:282

<sup>3</sup> Iceland or Greenland

<sup>4</sup> Giovanni Soranzo, Doge of Venice (1312–1328)

<sup>5</sup> Psalm 97:11