

Humanism and Tyranny

Studies in the Italian Trecento

BY

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COLUCCIO SALUTATI, "DE TYRANNO"

Coluccio, son of Piero, Chancellor of Florence, to Master Antonio of Aquila, student in Arts at Padua, Greeting!

A TREATISE ON TYRANTS, WITH AN INTRODUCTION

Since you ask of me a thing at once difficult to answer and yet worth knowing, I cannot refuse a reply, my learned friend — for such your letter shows you to be. It has always seemed to me fair to repay esteem with esteem and, if one can, to give a suitable reply to anyone who makes a reasonable inquiry. Indeed the very bond of human society, seeing that man is made for the sake of his fellow-man and that, according to the divine ordinance it is not good for man to be alone as he was created, requires not merely that we show favor to those who ask it, but that, as far as we can, we anticipate those who do not ask. And this not only in things that have reference to our final end, to which we are bound by our common faith, but also in those which mark the good citizen or, more broadly, the good man. The race of men is bound together by religious faith, by common citizenship and by nature. The first has to do with our final salvation; the second with the civil order; the third with human relations and the perfecting of mankind. Since, then, your inquiry touches directly or indirectly upon each one of these I cannot and ought not to decline to answer it.

But first I must refer to the beginning of your letter, in which you compliment me far too highly. For, if we owe a reply to one who asks for it, so do we to one who gives us the material for a reply. You assume many fine things of me — I hardly know whether to say, out of

politeness or out of ignorance. You speak too confidently of things that have come to you by common report, as if you had carefully investigated them. You praise me too much, nay, more than too much. You say that as a leader in each and every art worthy of the liberally educated man I am superabundantly equipped. You declare that I have won the praise of all men by singular talent, culture and refinement. To use your own words: besides my superior literary accomplishment I am a man devoted to giving pleasure to everyone; I spare myself no labor to give satisfaction to others, and on this you rest your hopes of a reply.

You say that I work for all, and that it makes little difference to me what class of men I address, provided only that I can be of service. You refer to certain letters of mine written to various scholars and containing things which they could not have learned from others or by themselves. You bring forward these things to give yourself greater confidence in the request you have to make.

I am truly sorry for your mistake in these matters; for I do feel that you have deceived yourself, taking "with Gallic lightness," as the saying is, things as proven which are only matters of hearsay, and praising me for what after all, even if it were in me, is not really my own. For what have I that has not been given to me, and *gratis* at that, not for my own merit, but by the grace of the bountiful Giver? I would rather have you give praise to Him who is the giver and the artificer, rather than to me the receiver and the mere tool of the craftsman's hand. Whatever I am, subject or accident, is His, whose work I am; to say it is mine would be the height of folly; to take praise for it would be unpardonable conceit. Wherefore I beg you henceforth to have done with this sort of thing and not to flatter my all too ready ear with such

Handwritten notes in the left margin of the second page:

①
 from Aristotle
 Aristotle's
 Aristotle's

