



COLUCCIO SALUTATI
POLITICAL WRITINGS

EDITED BY
STEFANO U. BALDASSARRI



TRANSLATED BY
ROLF BAGEMIHL



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♦ ♦ ♦
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Introduction



Scholars of Italian humanism tend to depict Coluccio Salutati as a Janus-like figure, a man at a crossroads, an author on the threshold of a new era that he himself has significantly contributed to usher in while retaining some no-less-significant features of the age about to disappear. There is solid evidence to justify this view of Salutati, as shown in the next pages, discussing his writings collected in the present anthology. Yet a widespread consequence of such an approach—especially when brought to extremes without contextualizing this humanist's figure—is that modern readers (even the most knowledgeable) are often disappointed by Salutati's work, finding it both inconsistent and below their high expectations. In regard to what is tempting to call the "demon" of consistency, one of the dogmas of literary criticism today, suffice it to say that if this were the main criterion for judging authors we should dismiss, among others, Plato, Cicero, Dante, and Tolstoy for lack of coherence either between their various works or between theory and practice. Speaking, instead, of high expectations (another sort of contemporary "fundamentalism," though this time one that trespasses by far the boundaries of literary criticism), the twentieth century has furnished many examples of scholars projecting their own desires and political agendas onto the subjects they studied. A well-known case is Hans Baron's distorted (and yet highly influential) view of the wars that Florence fought against Milan between the end of the fourteenth and the first half of the fifteenth centuries.¹ Interestingly, this very conflict constitutes the background to Salutati's *De tyranno*, many of his state letters, and his long reply to Loschi's invective against the Florentines, all of which are edited and translated in this volume. Putting aside our own ideological velleities, let us then try to contextualize briefly

the writings chosen for this anthology and provide, first of all, some basic information on Salutati's life and major works.²

Like most chancellors of Florence in the late Middle Ages and the early Renaissance, Coluccio Salutati (1331–1406) was born in the *contado* (as Florentine territory was then called), in Stignano, a hamlet close to the border with Lucca. His family was of rather humble condition,³ and his father, Piero, was a notary by profession. Since the latter served Taddeo de' Pepoli, lord of Bologna, it was there that Salutati was raised and educated, studying rhetoric with Piero da Moglio (a disciple of Petrarch) first and being trained in the *ars notaria* later, just as his father was before him.⁴ His early career led him to serve for several years as notary, chancellor, and secretary in various places (his hometown first, then Todi, and finally the papal curia). He later became *Segretario delle Riformagioni* (legislative secretary) of Lucca in 1370, before being appointed Chancellor of Florence in 1375, a post that he kept until his death, in May 1406. The chancellorship of this city was conferred on him just two months before the so-called "War of the Eight Saints" (1375–78) broke out between Florence and the Church.⁵ This crisis—caused by the menacing expansion of the papal state in central Italy that the Avignon popes had set as a condition for their return to Rome—forced Salutati to pen a series of "missives," or official state letters, on behalf of the Signoria, as the Florentines strove to resist the pontiff's enactment of the doctrine known as *plenitudo potestatis*. It was precisely on the grounds of this controversial doctrine upholding the Church's political (and, consequently, military) power that the pope tried to defend ecclesiastical prerogatives in central Italy and even extend them through his French prelates and the use of mercenary forces. Despite Florence's eventual defeat by the papacy, Salutati's fiery epistles—which make up part of the first documents in this anthology⁶—earned the chancellor immediate fame. To a large extent, this was a consequence of the effectiveness of his letters.⁷ In

the first stages of the war, Florence's main strategy was to stir rebellion among the cities subject to the papacy. Also thanks to Salutati's passionate missives, between late 1375 and February 1376 the following cities, whose councils had all been influenced by the Florentine chancellor's reiterated calls to overthrow papal rule, successfully revolted against the pontiff: Città di Castello, Perugia, Gubbio, Todi, Urbino, Forlì, and, finally, such key centers as Bologna and Ascoli. Conversely, the Church's response to a situation mostly caused by the Florentine government (of which Salutati was a high-ranking official) was both rapid and harsh: in March 1376 Gregory XI issued an interdict against Florence, and two years later, shortly before dying, he even started a trial for heresy against Salutati himself.⁸

It is worth stressing that the content of Florence's missives was dictated to the chancellor by the highest local authorities (the priors of the Florentine guilds and commune); as such, the missives cannot be taken at face value as unquestionable evidence of Salutati's personal political convictions.⁹ Their similarities with the humanist's private letters—which several scholars have duly remarked¹⁰—and, at the same time, the inevitable discrepancies will both be discussed later in relation to his treatise on tyranny. For the time being, instead, it is appropriate to emphasize that the missives penned by Salutati immediately stood out for their innovative rhetoric, the display of classical culture, and their ability to shape a new image of the city (largely based on the connection of Florence's republican present to its ancient Roman heritage), which would prove to be a sharp, effective, and flexible tool of propaganda for decades to come.¹¹ This is shown by their wide circulation and use as literary models all over the Italian peninsula and beyond. Even the Milanese, that is the Florentines' main political enemies at the turn of the century, proved sensitive to the rhetorical allure of Salutati's missives.¹² The reasons for such a "success" have been convincingly explained as follows by David Peterson in

an essay on the War of the Eight Saints: "As the propagandist of Florence's strategy to guarantee its own security by republicanizing central Italy, Salutati developed an anthropology of liberty that made its Roman genealogy accessible to all Italians in an ideology that was, at the same time, new and distinctively Florentine."¹³

Accomplishing such a deed was far from simple or predictable in the mid-1370s. Guelf Florence was then fighting — as just shown — against the pope, that is, its traditional ally and overlord. The Florentines' major accusation was that the Holy Father (at the time still residing in Avignon) was plotting to subdue all of Italy through the corrupt French legates whom he had put in charge of physically protecting the clergy as well as their rights and possessions in Italy. It is to them that Salutati alludes in his official letters with epithets such as "Gallic vultures," "barbarian and foreign peoples," "defamers," and the like.¹⁴ Hence the Florentines — who in Salutati's missives always style themselves, in keeping with an age-old tradition, as "the most devout sons of the Church" — felt compelled to reply (in a war that, as often noted, was mostly fought on paper) to defend not only their own liberty but that of the whole peninsula as well, taking on the role of standard-bearers of Italian liberty against all forms of tyranny. In so doing, Salutati shaped a language, devised a set of images, and articulated a kind of ideology that would prove most congenial to Florentine propaganda until at least the mid-fifteenth century, when the role increasingly played by the Medici family on the local scene would demand a significant shift in the city's political discourse at all levels.¹⁵

We can best perceive this momentous change through the accounts of the origins of Florence that local humanists would put forth in the course of the Quattrocento. In this respect, too, Salutati set a crucial precedent by proposing a version that would immediately be taken up and exploited in full by his most distinguished disciple, Leonardo Bruni.¹⁶ Within this anthology, the

main passage on this topic is to be found in Salutati's reply to Loschi's *Invective against the Florentines* (1401). Salutati authored this text—whose full title in English translation here reads *Reply to a Malevolent Detractor Who Has Written Vexingly Against the Renowned City of Florence*¹⁷—in the first half of 1403, less than a year after his city had won the war against Milan, thanks to Giangaleazzo Visconti's sudden death, in September 1402. Rebutting Loschi's accusation that the Florentines boasted their Roman origins without providing any evidence, Salutati launches into a passionate account to prove that the city was in fact founded under the Roman republic, thus before Caesar and Augustus put the senate under their own control. He does so in a highly innovative fashion, by relying not only on literary sources (some of which, like Pliny the Elder and Ptolemy, had never been used to this purpose before) but on archaeology and philology as well. In these few yet fundamental paragraphs of the *Contra maledicum et obiurgatorem*,¹⁸ Salutati deploys his knowledge of classical literature (above all Sallust and, even more significantly from an ideological point of view, Cicero) to demonstrate that Florence must have been established by the Romans (more precisely, by veterans of Sulla's army) right after the so-called Social War, which means around 88 BCE. Not only do utterly reliable literary sources support this, Salutati writes, but even the archaeological remains—he adds—that are still to be seen in the city to this day (all of which can clearly be recognized as Roman in style) attest to it without a shadow of a doubt.

This Roman republican heritage still informs the whole city and its inhabitants, as Salutati repeatedly claims in his reply to the Visconti secretary. This historical claim serves as a response to the latter's accusations that the Florentines are plotting—contrary to their obfuscatory propaganda—to subdue all of Italy, while posing as its defenders. To be sure, the Ciceronian aura permeating the text is not to be taken as a literary stratagem only. First of all, though determined—as already noted—not to attribute the *Invec-*

tiva in Florentinos to his one-time disciple and sincere admirer Loschi,¹⁹ Salutati is bent just the same on outdoing his opponent from a cultural point of view. His abundant use of Cicero (both as a source and as a rhetorical model) comes through as an important scholarly and political statement at one and the same time. On the one hand, Salutati is eager to prove himself superior to his opponent by means of frequent and well-chosen quotations from both Latin and Greek authors.²⁰ In this respect, considerable attention should be given to his use of such unusual sources for the time as Plutarch and Ptolemy.²¹ As is well known, in 1396 Salutati had been instrumental in convincing the erudite Byzantine teacher Manuel Chrysoloras to come to Florence and accept the first chair in Greek language and literature at any modern university in Western Europe. A year later Chrysoloras started teaching in the Florentine Studium (a post he kept until 1399), with the handsome yearly salary of three hundred gold florins. The outstanding sum was generously paid for by Palla Strozzi, who would eventually make a name for himself as a successful banker and refined art patron, apart from being one of Chrysoloras's Florentine students. Whether Palla (whom Giovanni Rucellai, his son-in-law, later praised as one of the ethical and cultural role models of fifteenth-century Florence)²² was already a member of Salutati's humanist circle at the time—if not a friend—alongside figures like Jacopo Angeli da Scarperia, Poggio Bracciolini, Leonardo Bruni, and Pier Paolo Vergerio has not yet been proven, but it seems most likely. Chrysoloras's three-year stay in the city turned out to be seminal for the rebirth of Greek in Latin Europe.²³ For the purpose at hand, it is worth noting that Salutati owes to his disciples (in all likelihood Bruni and Jacopo Angeli) and their studies with Chrysoloras the little knowledge of Greek that he displays in *Contra maledicum et obiurgatorem*. It is also probable that in that text Salutati coins the adjective "Plutarchean," just as a few years before he had invented a similar literary epithet ("Dantean") in *De fato et*

fortuna.²⁴ On the other hand, Salutati's intense use of Cicero (including technical works like the *De inventione*, as emphasized here in the notes to the text) to confute his Milanese opponent reveals how the chancellor was striving to prove republican freedom (and, therefore, Florentine culture) superior to tyranny in all respects, both practical and theoretical.

This takes us back to the first paragraph above and to its apparent dilemma. How is it possible that Salutati—who is duly regarded as the inventor of Florentine republican propaganda in the late Trecento—authored a text like *De tyranno*, in which he defends his beloved and admired fellow citizen Dante Alighieri for putting Caesar's murderers (Brutus and Cassius) in the lowest hell, with none other than Judas? Like his treatise *De saeculo et religione* (dating from 1381–82), on the contemplative versus the active life, or *De fato et fortuna* (1396), on the role of Divine Providence in man's life and history,²⁵ *De tyranno* has elicited a host of varied and yet in most cases disappointed responses by readers of Salutati. Even as keen a scholar of this humanist as Ronald Witt could not but express his dissatisfaction with what he called “this puzzling little tract” in his first essay on it.²⁶ Another famous expert on Italian humanism, the aforementioned Hans Baron, referred to *De tyranno* as “a problematical book,” and his description has remained to this day a sort of derogatory tag attached to it.²⁷ And yet, as shown by Daniela De Rosa and, to a lesser extent, by Witt himself many years after his first article cited above, *De tyranno* does have a greater amount of consistency than critics usually acknowledge.²⁸ Once again, it is a matter of paying attention to Salutati's other works as well as to their respective literary genres and never losing sight of their original background, both political and cultural. For obvious reasons, this short introduction is not the right place for a detailed analysis of either *De tyranno* or the many different readings of it that scholars have offered from the early twentieth century (when the first critical editions and extended studies

of his text appeared)²⁹ to the present. Rather, a summary of the contents is given, and, above all, it is shown how — though forced — Salutati's defense of Dante's choice to punish Cassius and Brutus in the worst way possible for killing Caesar is not as inconsistent with his previous writings as some scholars hold.

Salutati wrote *De tyranno* in the summer of 1400 to answer two questions he had been asked by a law student in Padua, Antonio of Aquila, most likely a disciple of the famous jurist Francesco Zabarella, a friend of the chancellor of Florence.³⁰ One of the two questions is what we find in the penultimate paragraph (§7) of the fifth and last chapter, just before the closing remarks. Here Salutati mentions Antonio's desire to know whether he regarded Antenor and Aeneas as traitors to Troy, as some believed, or not. Since this topic is quickly discussed in what may be deemed no more than a short appendix to the text, it is quite clear that Salutati's main interest in writing *De tyranno* lies elsewhere; it has to do with the topic extensively debated in the preceding chapters and sections of the book. It can thus be surmised that Antonio's other (and probably first) question to Salutati in a now lost letter ran something like this: Were Cassius and Brutus traitors to Rome for murdering Caesar? Antonio may then have also asked Salutati, as a sequel to this query, whether Dante was right in punishing Caesar's assassins in Canto 34 of *Inferno* alongside Judas. To any Florentine, however, and in particular to such a fond lover of Dante's poetry as Salutati,³¹ this last issue could not be avoided and called for an explanation. The treatise's structure can be summarized as follows, basically translating the titles accompanying each section: 1) Preface to Antonio of Aquila, 2) How to define a tyrant, 3) Is tyrannicide justifiable?, 4) Was Caesar a tyrant?, 5) Was Caesar justly murdered by Brutus and Cassius?, 6) Was Dante right in placing Brutus and Cassius in hell for murdering Caesar? Salutati's answer to the question concerning Antenor and Aeneas is inserted, as said above, in this last chapter.

As anticipated, most modern readers of *De tyranno* have been taken aback by Salutati's condemnation of Brutus and Cassius, on the ground that Caesar was not a tyrant. In fact, Salutati holds, Caesar was loved by the majority of the Romans, as attested by the honors that the common people paid to him at his funeral. True enough, Caesar did win the war against Pompey, but the latter did not appear any less violent than his opponent; they both craved power and would have done anything to attain it, as is typical not just of military conflicts but — above all — of civil wars, which are known to be the most ferocious. Besides, Caesar acted in a most clement way after coming to power, a quality acknowledged by all sources, including his former enemy Cicero. More important still to an assessment of *De tyranno*, Salutati adopts an Augustinian interpretation of history not unlike Dante's to assert that Caesar's victory was willed by God as part of a preordained divine plan. The latter was aimed at pacifying the whole world in view of Christ's coming; and such an accomplishment demanded the creation of as vast a monarchy as possible, which turned out to be the Roman Empire. Cassius and Brutus's unfortunate fate was, then, decreed by God himself as the fitting punishment for their crime. Consequently, Dante is right in consigning Caesar's assassins to the lowest pit of hell in his "divine poem."

As mentioned, Hans Baron has been one of the most disappointed readers of *De tyranno*. Discussing this text in his famous *Crisis*, he speaks of a reversal of Salutati's previous anti-Caesarean spirit, as expressed, for instance, in his public and private letters. In Baron's eyes such a turnabout is so profound to even raise doubts about Salutati's republicanism at the time, as if in old age he had gone through an astounding ideological change.³² Witt and De Rosa have provided a convincing refutation of Baron's reading of *De tyranno*. Both, although in various ways and with different emphasis, have highlighted a number of key features that are worth summarizing here. First, as also noted by Robert Black, we

cannot expect Salutati to show the same consistency in treating such matters as we would expect of a political philosopher.³³ His political statements were inevitably dictated by the needs of the Florentine state at precise moments; seen from this perspective, rhetorical ability (almost synonymous with flexibility, to use a contemporary catchword) mattered more than coherence. This is also true of *De tyranno*, a text written in 1400, when Florence—once again at war with the duke of Milan, as it had been almost continuously since 1390—was trying to have Emperor Wenceslaus (Giangaleazzo Visconti's most influential ally) deposed and replaced with Robert of Bavaria. Eventually the Florentines succeeded at this and even convinced the newly elected emperor—not without disbursing a considerable sum—to come to their help in Italy fighting against the Milanese. A rebuttal of Cicero's well-known condemnation of Caesar for his authoritarian aims, which Salutati himself had adopted again and again in his missives and elsewhere, was necessary to defend Dante's reading of that period of Roman history. Understandably, such a move demanded that Salutati carry out a reassessment—at least partially—of the respective merits of monarchy, on the one hand, and of republican freedom, on the other. Such reevaluation of monarchy as we find in *De tyranno*, however, is not altogether inconsistent with the chancellor's previous writings. In this treatise he resorts to a medieval commonplace to assert that, theoretically speaking, a one-man rule (provided such man is righteous) is better than any other political system, as it most resembles God's rule over the universe. In practice, however, it often happens that kings are not just and therefore deserve to be overthrown by the very people they should govern. Salutati then resorts to another point that had already been exploited by previous medieval thinkers (and that Savonarola, too, adopted in his late fifteenth-century treatise on the Florentine government).³⁴ Like Ptolemy of Lucca, Salutati argues that not all communities are fit to be ruled by a monarch; some are

actually better off with a popular government, because such is the kind of system that their nature demands.³⁵ Florence is precisely such a place, but that does not contradict what Salutati has stated before about monarchies being theoretically closer to the divine model than republics.

Scholars, as previously noted, have always emphasized the combination of traditional and innovative features in Salutati's thoughts and writings. Some speak of an affinity between this humanist and scholasticism, as shown by the very books he owned and quotes from in many of his texts. The same—let it be said in passing—is true of many other humanists, but this should not surprise us. Such secularizing views as Bruni's or Valla's turn out to be exceptions more than the rule, if we read this kind of literature while keeping our ideological expectations or prejudices in check. In the case of *De tyranno*, however, a few aspects should be mentioned in brief. First of all, if Salutati's view of Caesar seems controversial and ambiguous, it should be kept in mind—as Witt himself warned in one of his studies—that the very figure of Caesar was particularly ambivalent throughout the Middle Ages.³⁶ Authors would, for instance, chastise his authoritarian goals while praising his outstanding clemency or extol his military prowess while condemning his reckless political conduct. At that time, no less than today, Caesar aroused interest and stirred debate exactly by being such a strong and controversial figure.

Similar nuances must be taken into account when talking about medieval political theories. Even supporters of the empire would grant that the emperor was at the top of a hierarchy that included—without effacing local peculiarities and age-old rights—kingdoms, provinces, and cities. The latter, because of their size, could certainly be run (and were in fact more efficiently run) by a republican government. Also, Saint Augustine (one of Salutati's favorite Fathers of the Church) taught that whereas some Roman emperors shamed themselves by indulging the most wicked vices,

the establishment of the empire per se had been necessary to the diffusion of the Christian faith, both because it brought peace to the world when Jesus was born and also because, after the emperors had embraced the only true religion, it could prove a most beneficial instrument for the salvation of human souls. It was not the empire in and of itself, therefore, that deserved to be condemned but only its misuse by vicious rulers. It was from Saint Augustine, again, as well as from the histories of Orosius, Augustine's disciple, and from Dante's worldview that Salutati derived—especially toward the end of his life, from the last decade of the fourteenth century onward—a providential reading of history. In Salutati's eyes, Divine Providence intervened in human affairs so as to carry out a preordained plan that could not be understood at first, but only seen in its true perspective much later. This view of history is first best expressed by the aging chancellor in his *De fato et fortuna*, a text that represents an important ideological stage that contributed to his writing a treatise like *De tyranno*. It is in *De fato et fortuna*, for instance, that we find the following passage on God's intervention in the Roman civil war, which pitted Octavian and Mark Antony against Caesar's murderers:

But with the Divine Will deciding that at the coming of the true king, His Son, the world would be under one prince of princes and, since the disposition of God was the power behind worldly affairs—about which our Dante says: "Your wisdom has no means of countering her; she foresees, judges, and pursues her reign, no less god than the gods who reign elsewhere"—I say this disposition of God ordained all matters of the civil war toward the goal of a future monarchy, so that by chance and beyond the intention of the actors those things occurred that led to the end of the senatorial regime.³⁷

As noted above, and as was convincingly argued by Witt, Dante's influence on Salutati grew considerably toward the end of