



WAT TYLER'S ADDRESS TO THE KING  
Thomas Campbell\*

King of England,  
Petitioning for pity is most weak—  
The sovereign<sup>1</sup> people ought to demand justice.  
I lead them here against the Lord's anointed<sup>2</sup>,  
Because his ministers have made him odious!  
His yoke is heavy, and his burden grievous.

Why do you carry on this fatal war,  
To force upon the French a king they hate;  
Tearing our young men from their peaceful homes,  
Forcing his hard-earned fruits from the honest peasant,  
Distressing us to desolate our neighbors?

Why was this ruinous poll-tax imposed,  
But to support your court's extravagance,  
And your mad title to the crown of France?  
Shall we sit tamely down beneath these evils,  
Petitioning for pity? King of England,  
Why are we sold like cattle in your markets,  
Deprived of every privilege of man?  
Must we sit tamely at our tyrant's feet,  
And, like your spaniels, lick the hand that beats us?

You sit at ease in your gay palaces;  
The costly banquet courts your appetite;  
Sweet music soothes your slumbers: we, the while,  
Scarce by hard toil can earn a little food,  
And sleep scarce from the cold night-wind,

Whilst your wild projects wrest the little from us  
Which might have cheered the wintry hours of age!

The Parliament forever asks more money;  
We toil and sweat for money for your taxes;  
Where is the benefit—what good reap we  
From all the counsels of your government?  
Think you that we should quarrel with the French?  
What boots to us your victories, your glory?  
We pay, we fight—you profit at your ease.

Do you not claim the country as your own?  
Do you not call the venison of the forest,  
The birds of heaven, your own?—prohibiting us,  
Even though in want of food, to seize the prey  
Which Nature offers? King! Is all this just?  
Think you we do not feel the wrongs we suffer?  
The hour of retribution is at hand,  
And tyrants tremble—mark me, King of England!

*Monroe's Fourth Reader, 1872*

Walter Tyler was the leader of the 1381 Peasant's Revolt in England. While meeting with King Richard II, he was struck down for offending the king, but carried off alive by his supporters. He was later captured and beheaded at the order of the King. The illustration is from a tapestry of 1384. Due in part to the violence and chaos of the revolt, it lost support and was crushed. Some years later, Richard was overthrown by the nobility, imprisoned, and murdered in his cell. Those events are the subject of Shakespeare's play, *The Tragedy of King Richard II*.

That was centuries before Thomas Campbell's time, but, ironically, England was again at war to restore a hated monarch to France; the heir to the king deposed and beheaded in the French Revolution. The complaints lodged against the English king at that time, George III, were similar to those lodged against Richard II.

Was Thomas Campbell simply relating irrelevant history in this poem, or was he drawing a parallel, and issuing a warning?

1. It was a radical idea in even in Campbell's time, certainly in Wat Tyler's time, that the people as a whole were 'sovereign', that is, endowed with the right to govern themselves.
2. The king, most of the nobility, and many of the common people believed that rulers were ordained by God to their position of authority. Many people believed that kings answered only to God. Others, however, believed that the rule of the king was subject to his proper behavior. Tyler, in Campbell's words, was declaring that Richard, in letting his government oppress the people, had become "odious", a stench in the nostrils of God, and therefore forfeited his Divine right to rule.