FRANCESCO PETRARCA

How a Ruler Ought to Govern His State*

Translated by BENJAMIN G. KOHL

For a long time now, distinguished sir, I have been meaning to write to you. And you have, in your usual way, gently reproved me, so that I am now aware that I have omitted your name from among the names of the many great men and men of middle rank to whom I have addressed letters. This omission is especially disgraceful when I consider the patronage that I have received from you and your father. Indeed, it would be an enormous act of ingratitude if I should let myself forget the thanks and affection that I should always hold for you. Therefore, I have decided to write to you even though I am still undecided where I ought to begin and on what topic. This indecision does not derive from the lack of a suitable subject matter, but rather from a perplexing abundance of material, so that I feel like a traveler poised at a crossroads. On the one hand, your great and constant generosity compels me to tender you my deepest thanks. Indeed, it is a time-honored custom to give thanks to friends and especially to princes for their gifts, and I have done so to you many times. On the other hand, you have so daily and continually laden me with gifts and honors that I, weighted down with the number and magnitude of your gifts, cannot ever hope to repay you adequately with mere

* Complete translation of Rerum Senilium libri XIV. Ad magnum Franciscum de Carraria Paduae dominum Epistola i Quales est debeat qui rem publicam regit, ed V. Usuni (Padua, 1922).
words. Rather, I think that it would be better to pass over such
generosity in respectful silence than to try and repay it with in-
adequate words.

So I leave aside this matter of gratitude and turn to the vast and
easy task of singing your praises. Now and again it has been the
custom of many men to praise princes (and indeed I have done so
myself occasionally), not in order to gain favors from those who
are praised as much as to pay homage to the truth and to spur the
prince on to greatness with the very stimulus of praise to a gen-
erous mind, which is a spur more powerful than anything else.
For in these matters of giving praise I find nothing more offensive
than adulation or an inconstant attitude. There are those indeed
who would praise unworthy men and there are others who, having
praised their subjects, promptly begin to vituperate them with an
incredible turn of mind. I know of nothing more dishonorable,
more base, than this. And in this matter so especially notorious was
Cicero (whom I esteem and admire more than any other ancient
author) that I feel almost compelled to hate him. Cicero did
this to many people, but, most significantly, he laded and honored
Julius Caesar with a wealth of praise and then subjected Caesar to
insults and abuse. Read Cicero’s letters to his brother Quintus, in
which everything said there about Caesar is friendly and compli-
mentary. But then turn to his letters to Atticus, in which you first
will find mixed feelings toward Caesar and finally even hatred and
reproach. Read Cicero’s orations, spoken before Caesar alone or
before him when he was present in the Senate; so great are these
praises of Caesar that they seem unmerited by any mortal and be-

beyond the capacity of a mortal genius to compose. But read further
in the book *On Duties* and in the Philippic orations and you will
find expressions of hatred equal to the former affection and base
abuse comparable to earlier praise. What makes these great changes
in Cicero’s attitude even worse is that Cicero gave Caesar nothing
but praise while he was alive and nothing but vituperation after he
was dead. I would have been able to tolerate this much more
easily if Cicero had criticized Caesar when he was alive and
praised him after he was dead, because usually death either di-
iminishes or extinguishes altogether hatred and envy. However,
Julius Caesar had a companion in this situation (as he did in many
things) in the person of his nephew and adopted son Caesar.

Augustus, who was inferior to Julius Caesar in his military
prowess but surely superior in his ability to rule. Cicero, likewise,
at first praised Augustus immoderately, but then he began to
vituperate him strongly while still alive and even wrote fierce
censures of him. I am reluctant to speak thus of a man whom I
esteem so much, but truth is stronger than admiration. I regret
that it must be this way, but it is. And I do not doubt that if
Cicero were present he would answer me easily with his overpow-
ering eloquence, but the truth is not altered by mere words.

I think I shall never turn with a diseased mind from praise to
vituperation. Now, as I return to my theme, this occurred to me at
the very outset of my discussion with you: While true virtue does
not reject merited glory, glory should follow it even if virtue is
unwilling, just as the shadow follows the body. I said to myself:
This man, you can easily see, prefers to be criticized rather than
praised, and it is easier to acquire favor with him by finding fault
than by giving him due praise. What, therefore, shall I do? What
course shall I take? A man whom I do not hesitate to praise I
would not fear to criticize if he would be as fine a subject for
criticism as for praise. I confess that it is the condition of mortals
that no one is entirely above reproach. A person who has a few
small defects can be called perfect and very good. Therefore, give
thanks to God who made you what you are, so that if your detrac-
tor and your praiser were of equal ability the praiser would
naturally be more eloquent. This is like the case of the two farmers
who are of equal ability and energy; the one who has the luck to
own the more fertile land will appear to be the better farmer.
Likewise, in the case of two ship captains equal in every other
way, he will be the more fortunate who sails on more tranquil
seas and is propelled by more favorable breezes.

But after I had decided to criticize you and selected this topic
for my epistolary discussion, I had found nothing in you worthy
of blame except for that one thing concerning which I had a
private discussion with you some time ago. If in this matter you
will be so kind as to pay heed to my humble and faithful advice,
there is scarcely any doubt that you will soon derive healthy
nourishment for mind and body and for the greatness of your

1. An allusion to the pseudo-Cicero *Epistola ad Octavianum.*
present fame and future glory. So I will express it to you with the same words that Crassus used with Caesar on the battlefield of Thessaly: "You will think me either dead or alive." I shall not speak of this any more. For what is the use of words to those who already understand and know? You know what I want, and I ought not to want, nor am I able to want, anything but your good.

I do not doubt that you know this.

Since things are this way, I feel that I am relieved from telling at this point the long story that, as I have said, is not in the least pleasant for you and, in any case, is well known to everyone. I am referring to the fact that in the very flower of your manhood you were deprived of your worthy and magnanimous father, by whose example and erudition you were able to learn everything that is noble and magnificent. At the time when it seemed especially fitting for you to have your own mentor, you took up the reins of government and, with the city of Padua under your control, overcame the difficulties created by your youth. You ruled with such competence and such maturity that no rumor, no hint of rebellion, disturbed the city in that time of great change. Next, after a short time, you transformed into a large surplus the enormous deficit that debts to foreign powers had left in your treasury. And now the years and experience in government have so matured you that you are esteemed as an outstanding lord, not only by your own citizens but also by the lords of many other cities, who hold you up as a model. As a result, I have often heard neighboring peoples express the wish that they could be governed by you and nurture envy for your subjects. You have never devoted yourself to either the arrogance of pompous display or to the idleness of pleasure, but you have devoted yourself to just rule so that everyone acknowledges that you are peaceful without being reckless and dignified without being prudish. As a result, modesty coexists with magnanimity in your character. You are thus full of dignity. Although, because of your incredible

humanity, you permit easy access to yourself even to the most humble, still one of your most outstanding acts is to have at the same time contracted for your daughters very advantageous marriages with noble families in distant lands. And you have been, above all other rulers, a lover of public order and peace—a peace that was never thought possible by the citizen-body when Padua was ruled by a communal regime or by any of your family, no matter how long they had the power—you alone constructed many strong fortresses at suitable points along the Paduan frontiers. Thus you acted in every way so that the citizens felt free and secure with you as a ruler, and no innocent blood was spilled. You also have pacified all your neighbors either by fear or by love or by admiration for your excellence, so that for many years now you have ruled a flourishing state with serene tranquility and in continual peace. But at last that adversary of the human race, that enemy of peace [the Devil], suddenly stirred up a dangerous war with that power you never feared. Consequently, although you still loved peace, you fought with Venice bravely and with great determination over a long time, even though you lacked the aid from allies that you had hoped for. And when it seemed most advantageous to do so, you skillfully concluded peace so that at one stroke you won twofold praise both for your bravery and your political wisdom. From these facts and from many others I shall omit, you have been viewed as vastly superior to all other rulers of your state and to all rulers of other cities, not only in the judgment of your own subjects but indeed in the opinion of the whole world as well.

But praising you in detail when the facts speak so clearly for themselves would be only a pleasant exercise, and it is a useless chore to try and criticize you. Besides, because of the lack of material my speech would end in unbecoming silence as soon as I

2. Julius Caesar Bellum civile 3.91.3.
3. An allusion to the assassination in December 1350 in Padua of Francesco's father, Giacomo II da Carrara, by a distant kinsman. As a result, Francesco, then a young man in his twenties, succeeded his popular father to the lordship of Padua.

4. Francesco da Carrara contracted marriages for several of his daughters with the scions of noble houses in Italy and Germany, including the count of Oettingen, the count of Veglè, and the duke of Saxony.
5. An allusion to the border war fought with Venice in 1372–75, which Francesco da Carrara ended by agreeing to the payment of an indemnity to Venice while he maintained substantially his original frontiers. See Paolo Sambin, "La guerra del 1372–73 tra Venezia e Padova," Archivio Veneto 5th ser., 38–41 (1946–47): 1–76.
began to talk. So I shall tell you what I have decided to speak about, a topic which I am sure is well known to you even without any further elaboration but which may be sometimes useful even to someone like yourself who has already been made aware of it. For even though the mind has grasped something well and learned it thoroughly and used that knowledge frequently, it can recall that thing when stimulated by another and, urged on by another’s words, it follows more readily a path it would still take by itself. I shall discuss, therefore, something that almost everyone knows but that people often neglect, namely, what should be the character of a man to whom the task of governing a state has been entrusted. I am not unaware that such a subject could easily fill many volumes, and that I am content to write only one letter. Yet for some people a single word is more useful than a long speech is for others, and, moreover, the quality of the mind of the listener is much more important than the eloquence of the writer, whoever he may be. Indeed, let me repeat what I have often said: There must be within you a tiny spark that can be increased by fanning and will eventually burst into flame. Without this one will have only fanned dead ashes for no good purpose. I hope (or indeed I am certain) that in you there are not just faint embers but bright and burning coals or even an excellent flame of virtue and an able mind that is accustomed to utilize all it hears. I can recall how much one letter—a great one because it was the product of a great mind, namely the letter from Marcus Brutus to Marcus Tullius Cicero—stimulated you to excellence, so that for a long time you could scarcely speak of anything else. And I often used to say to myself about you: If he were not such a true friend of virtue he would never have been stimulated so strongly by such a brief, though admittedly excellent, piece of writing. Moreover, it has often been a great source of pleasure to me that I had procured this letter for you, and thus rescued from oblivion and neglect a letter that had been previously lost for a long time.

But before I begin to discuss this subject that I have just proposed, I wish to recall for you a passage from Cicero that, I suspect, is not unknown to you. Surely a man like yourself, who wants to be a good ruler, will listen eagerly to this passage as soon

as you know that a good ruler is as dear to God as the state itself is dear to God. Here, therefore, is the passage from the sixth book of *On the Commonwealth*:

But, Africanus, be assured of this, so that you may be even more eager to defend the commonwealth: all those who have preserved, aided or enlarged their fatherland have a special place prepared for them in the heavens, where they may enjoy an eternal life of happiness. For nothing of all that is done on earth is more pleasing to the supreme god who rules the whole universe in justice, which is called the State. Their rulers and preservers come from heaven and to that place they return.

Moreover, it is imagined that this conversation took place in Heaven. Who, therefore, could be so completely heartened, so opposed to excellence, and so contemptuous of true happiness that he would not seek out the task of governing and strive after such rewards? For although it is a pagan who speaks, yet his thoughts is not opposed to Christian truth or religious belief, even though our way of thinking and theirs are quite different when it comes to such doctrines as the creation of man and the soul.

But now at last I shall do what I have promised, and I shall discuss those things that the lord of a state ought to do. And I want you to look at yourself in this letter as though you were gazing in a mirror. If you see yourself in what I am describing (as no doubt you will quite often), enjoy it. And may you become every day more devoted and more faithful to God, who has bestowed upon us every good and perfect gift and virtue; and may you, albeit with enormous effort, overcome every difficulty and rise to that degree of holiness beyond which you cannot at the present moment ascend. On the other hand, if sometimes you feel that it is difficult for you to meet the standards I describe, I advise you to put your hands to your face and polish the countenance of your great reputation written there, so that you might become more

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6. An allusion to Cicero *Epistulae ad Brutum* 1.4a.

7. Cicero *Somnium Scipionis* 13 (De re publica 6.12), which was known in the fourteenth century only by its inclusion in Macrobius, *Commentarii in somnium Scipionis*. 
attractive, and certainly more illustrious, as a result of this experience.

The first quality is that a lord should be friendly, never terrifying, to the good citizens, even though it is inevitable that he be terrifying to evil citizens if he is to be a friend to justice. "For he does not carry a sword without good cause, since he is a minister of God," as the Apostle says.⁸ Now nothing is more foolish, nothing is more destructive to the stability of the state, than to wish to be dreaded by everyone. Many princes, both in antiquity and in modern times, have wanted nothing more than to be feared and have believed that nothing is more useful than fear and cruelty in maintaining their power. Concerning this belief we have an example in the case of the barbaric emperor named Maximinus.⁹ In fact, nothing is farther from the truth than these opinions; rather, it is much more advantageous to be loved than to be feared, unless we are speaking of the way in which a devoted child fears a good father. Any other kind of fear is diametrically opposed to what a ruler should desire. Rulers in general want to reign for a long time and to lead their lives in security, but to be feared is opposed to both of these desires, and to be loved is consistent with both. Fear is opposed both to longevity in office and security in life; goodwill favors both, and this affirmation is supported by that opinion that one can hear from Cicero (or from the mouth of a Cicero who is speaking the truth). He says: "Of all things, none is better adapted to secure influence and hold it fast than is love, and nothing is more foreign to that end than is fear."¹⁰ And a little further on he states: "Fear is but a poor safeguard of lasting power, while affection, on the other hand, may be trusted to keep it safe forever."¹¹ Since you know well that this matter was important to Cicero, let me cite another passage: "To be a citizen dear to all, to deserve well of the State, to be praised, courted, loved is glorious; but to be feared and an object of hatred is invidious, detestable, and proof of weakness and corruption."¹²

Now it does not seem necessary to speak of security since there can be no one so stupid and ignorant of politics that he does not know that opinion is criticized by certain men affirming that security is always threatened and ultimately destroyed by fear. This fear is in subjects and not in the ruler, so that it is their security, not his, that is endangered. To which I answer with the famous words directed by Laberius, a Roman knight noted for his wisdom and learning, to Julius Caesar: "He who is feared by many must himself fear many in turn."¹³ That this opinion might be more convincing, let me reinforce it with another similar statement by Cicero, whom I have often named: "Furthermore, those who wish to be feared must inevitably be afraid of those whom they intimidate."¹⁴ He borrowed the essence of this idea, which we should not be ashamed to embrace, from Ennius: "Whom they fear, they hate. And whoever one hates, one hopes to see dead."¹⁵ And I add that whatever one wants, one desires to become. What strong passions urge many to accomplish can scarcely be forestalled.

Now, although the truth of the matter is as I have just sketched, there still are those who say: "They may hate me, provided they fear me." This was the speech that Euripides gave to that cruel tyrant Atreus.¹⁶ Daily did Caligula, who was certainly no more merciful than Atreus, say and practice this idea, which was beneficial neither to its creator nor to its followers.¹⁷ In this last category many people have wanted to place even Julius Caesar. This would certainly be strange if true; for although Julius Caesar did, to be sure, have an enormous appetite for empire and glory, I would say too enormous, still he did everything with mildness and mercy, with munificence and an incredible generosity, so that he would be loved rather than feared. For example, he kept nothing for himself from the booty won in his numerous victories and military commands, except for the very faculty to lavish gifts on others, and to this the most authoritative writers give witness. Indeed, Julius Caesar was so prone to be merciful to others that Cicero himself wrote that Caesar was accustomed to forget nothing except past

⁸ Romans 13:4
⁹ See Scriptores historiarum Augustae 1988
¹⁰ Cicero De officiis 2.7.23.
¹¹ Cicero De officiis 217.23
¹² Cicero Orationes Philippicae 1.14.23
¹³ Macrobius, Saturnalia 2.7.4 The same anecdote was told earlier by Petrarca in his Rerum memorandarum libri 3.3.4–5 (ed. Gius Billanovich, [Rome, 1943], p. 126).
¹⁴ Cicero De officiis 2.7.24
¹⁵ Cicero De officiis 2.7.23
¹⁶ Cicero De officiis 1.28.97; 3.21.82.
¹⁷ Suetonius Caligula 30.
injuries. It is indeed a splendid kind of revenge to pardon past wrongs; to forget them altogether is more splendid still. What is most amazing is that this quality was noted as Caesar’s most noble trait by Cicero, who had as often viewed him as an enemy as seen him as a friend. Do you want more examples? I shall remain silent concerning Caesar’s other excellent qualities, but I must say that he was endowed with many more virtues than anyone else, although they were not sufficiently acknowledged. Indeed, he was cut down by those very men upon whom he had heaped wealth and honors. On these men he had bestowed the privileges that came to him from his victories, and he had forgiven every one of his hostile acts and injuries. But neither his generosity nor his mercy aided Caesar in the end. So it was with good reason that at his funeral this verse of Pacuvius was sung:

That ever I, unhappy man, should save
Wretches, who thus have brought me to the grave.  

In this case it can be asked what were the causes that brought about this hatred, since the conspiracy against Caesar was surely not lacking in hatred. I myself can find no cause except a certain insolence and haughtiness of bearing that raised Caesar above the customs of his country because he enjoyed unwarranted honors and usurped extraordinary dignities. Rome was not yet ready to endure the imperial pride that was so much increased by Caesar’s successors, that compared to them Caesar seems to be the very soul of humility. If then even Julius Caesar was not protected by his power and wealth from the hatred of the many, it is an important question to ask in what ways are the love of one’s subjects to be sought. Since hatred is the cause of ruin, so love is the cause of the contrary of ruin. The former casts one down, the latter protects a ruler.

What I can say is that the nature of public love is the same as private love. Seneca says: “I shall show you a love potion that is made without medicines, without herbs, without the incantations of any poison-maker. If you want to be loved, love.” There it is. Although many other things could be said, this saying is the summation of everything. What is the need for magical arts, what for any reward or labor? Love is free; it is sought out by love alone. And who can be found with such a steely heart that he would not want to return an honorable love? “Honorable” I say, for a dishonorable love is not love at all, but rather hatred hidden under the guise of love. Now to return love to someone who loves basely is to do nothing other than to compound one crime with another and to become a part of another person’s disgraceful deceit. On this topic I shall, therefore, speak no more, but let us return to the theme of honorable love of others.

Indeed, from the discussion of this topic nothing but immense and honorable pleasure ought to come to you since you are so beloved by your subjects that you seem to them to be not a lord over citizens but the “father of your country.” In fact this was the title of almost all of the emperors of antiquity; some of them bore the name justly, but others carried it so unjustly that nothing more perverse can be conceived. Both Caesar Augustus and Nero were called “father of his country.” The first was a true father, the second was an enemy of both his country and of religion. But this title really does belong to you. There is no one among your citizens (that is, among those who really seek the peace and well-being of Padua) who looks upon you otherwise, who thinks of you as anything other than as a father. But you have to continue to strive so that you merit this dignity; it endures forever because of your noble efforts. I hope that, urged and encouraged, you will continue to rule as you already willingly have ruled for a long time. You should know, moreover, that to merit this kind of esteem you must always render justice and treat your citizens with goodwill. Do you really want to be a father to your citizens? Then you must want for your subjects what you want for your own children. I am not saying that you must love each of your subjects as much as you do one of your own children, but you should love each subject in the same way you do your child. For God, the supreme lawgiver, did not say: “Love your neighbor as much as you love yourself,” but “as yourself.” This means love sincerely,
without deceit, without seeking advantages or rewards, and in a spirit of pure love and freely given goodwill. I am, moreover, of the opinion (without disputing the opinions of others) that you ought to love not each individual citizen but the whole citizen body at the same time, not so much as you love a child or a parent, but as you love yourself. Whereas in the case of individuals there are individual feelings for each one, in the case of the state all feelings are involved. Therefore, you ought to love your citizens as you do your children, or rather (if I may put it this way) as a member of your own body or as a part of your soul. For the state is one body and you are its heart. Moreover, this act is to be manifested by kind words, especially in righteous actions, and above all (as I was already saying) with justice and devotion to duty. For who could not love someone who has always pleasant, just, helpful, and always showed himself to be a friend? And if we add to these fine qualities the material benefits that good lords are accustomed to bestow on their subjects, then surely there develops an incredible fund of goodwill among the citizens that will serve as a firm and handsome foundation for a lasting government.

So put away arms, bodyguards, mercenaries, bugles, and trumpets, and use all these things only against the enemy because with your citizens your love is sufficient. As Cicero says: "The prince ought to be surrounded not with arms, but with the love and goodwill of his subjects." And I reckon as citizens those who desire the preservation of the state and not those who are always trying to change things, for these should be thought of not as citizens but as rebels and public enemies. These considerations call to mind that well-known saying of Augustus: "Whoever does not wish to disturb the present state of the city is a good citizen and a good man." Therefore, I have no doubt that whoever desires the opposite should be viewed as evil and not worthy to bear the name of citizen and enjoy the community of good men. In any case, in these matters your own nature has always guided you well, so that you have already gained both the citizens' love and goodwill. These qualities are, indeed, not just a path to glory, but even a road to salvation. As the good father said to his fine son Scipio Africanus: "Love justice and duty, which are very important in regard to parents and kinsmen, and most of all, to your native country. Such a life is the road to heaven." What lover of heaven would not love the road by which he may ascend to Heaven?

Now there are innumerable examples of the fact that arms will not defend evil and unjust leaders from the wrath of their oppressed subjects. It will suffice to adduce here only the most interesting and notorious instances. What use to Caligula were his German bodyguards even though they hastened to his defense? In extreme danger, Nero was informed that the soldiers had deserted their posts and his guards had fled. But no cohorts of soldiers were necessary for Augustus, Vespasian, and Titus. Consider the death of Augustus: at his death bed you do not find armed bodyguards but rather friendly subjects, and, in conversation with friends amidst the embraces of his beloved wife, Augustus did not expire and die but rather was almost lulled to sleep. Afterwards his remains were laid to rest with more honors than owed a human being, and his memory was cherished. Vespasian, who believed that it was not proper for an emperor to die standing up, expired held off the floor in the hands of his many friends. Afterwards his son Titus met a premature but peaceful death with innumerable expressions of gratitude. As a result, Titus's death was viewed (as Suetonius says) as more of a tragedy for mankind than for himself. Indeed, unless I am mistaken, all those princes who pass their lives in governing a state ought to consider and remember the following: the death of good princes is for them tranquil and happy while it is terrifying and dangerous for their subjects. For evil princes precisely the opposite is true. In that same city of Rome, where (as I have just mentioned) many emperors have died in complete peace and contentment and have had their names recalled by everyone with honor and admiration—in that city Domitian, the brother of Titus, was killed, and the Senate itself applauded his demise, besmirching his reputation (as I have seen written) with bitter denunciations and calumnies.

23 Cicero Orationes Philippicas 2 4.112.
24. See Macrobius Saturnalia 2.4.18.
25 Suetonius Domitian 23.
27 Suetonius Nero 47.
29 Suetonius Vespasianus 24.
30 Suetonius Titus 10-11.
31 Suetonius Domitian 23.
Further, the Senate decreed that his statues be taken down and destroyed, that his name be cancelled from inscriptions, and that the very memory of him be obliterated. Likewise, Galba’s very head was detached, stuck on a spear, and carried about by camp followers and servant boys through the encampments hostile to him to the jeers and horror of all. 32 Vitellius was cut down with many blows on the Scala Gemonia in the Forum and hacked into many pieces. Finally, his remains were dragged around on a hook and thrown into the Tiber. 33

I shall pass over examples of many others who met their end in horrible ways. But does not this vast difference in manner of death surely follow from a vast difference in manner of living? For this reason that very wise emperor Marcus Aurelius, who joined to the difficult task of governing an empire the name and learning of a philosopher, after he had discussed the fall of many emperors who preceded him, concluded by saying that each emperor met the death that was consistent with his manner of life. He predicted that he himself would be among those who died peacefully. 34 Indeed, his prediction came true. Now since this was the opinion of a great and wise personage, and since every wise man agrees that one should live as decently and well as possible in order to gain—besides the many other benefits from leading a good life—the additional benefit of dying well. Surely it is not too great a task to spend all the preceding years well for a worthy final hour, although, according to the best opinion, this passage into eternity requires only a moment. And we should not wonder at this. Not should we be surprised since we enter an immense city through a narrow gate, and we penetrate the vast reaches of the sea in a tiny ship. Likewise, through that brief passage of death we enter into an eternity, and just as the soul is when death takes it, so it endures for all time.

Now I shall speak of justice, the very important and noble function that is to give to each person his due so that no one is punished without good reason. Even when there is a good reason for punishment you should incline to mercy, following the example of Our Heavenly Judge and Eternal King. For no one of us is immune from sin and all of us are weak by our very nature, so there is no one of us who does not need mercy. Hence, one who wishes to be just must also be merciful. Therefore, although mercy and justice seem, at first glance, to be opposites, they are in fact inseparably linked. Indeed, it is as St. Ambrose says so perceptively in his book On the Death of the Emperor Theodosius: “Justice is nothing other than mercy, and mercy is the same as justice.” 35 Thus, the two qualities are not merely linked; they are one. Now this is not to say that you should let go scot-free murderers, traitors, poisoners, and other such miscreants, so that by being merciful to a few criminals you are actually harming the vast majority of your subjects. What I am suggesting is that you ought to be merciful to those who have gone astray a little and who have lapsed momentarily if it can be done without encouraging their example. But otherwise remember that too much mercy and indiscriminate leniency can lead to a greater cruelty.

Now, after justice, the best way to earn the affection of your citizenry is generosity. Even if the head of a state cannot benefit individual subjects, he may at least benefit the entire population. There is hardly anyone who esteems someone from whom he does not expect either private or public benefaction. Of course, I am speaking of that esteem in which princes are held; among friends and equals there is a different kind of love, which is sufficient in itself, neither asking for favors nor expecting them. In the sphere of public beneficence there is the restoration of temples and public buildings for which Caesar Augustus, above all others, is to be praised. Livy named him rightly “the builder and restorer of all temples.” 36 Similarly, Suetonius says: “He boasted, not without cause, that he found a city of brick and left one of marble.” 37 Just as important is the construction of the walls of the city, which gave fame to the name of Aurelian, otherwise a cruel and bloody emperor. In the less than six years during which he ruled, this emperor enlarged the walls of the city of Rome to their present dimensions. As a result, the historian Flavius Vopiscus, following,

32 Suetonius Galba 20
33 Suetonius Vitellius 17
34 Verulamius Cesariorum Augustarum 4 83.
35 St. Ambrose, De obitu Theodosii imperatoris 26 (= PL 15:1456).
36 Livy Ab urbe condita 4.20.
37 Suetonius Divus Augustus 28
I believe, the system of measures of antiquity, was prompted to say: "The circumference of the walls was now nearly fifty miles."38 But you, sir, have been relieved of the task of wall-building thanks to the great industry of your forebears. In fact, I do not know a city in all of Italy, or even all of Europe, that is ringed with walls more handsome than Padua's.

But the ancients, I believe, as much concerned with the construction of highways as with the erection of walls. While walls give safety in time of war, roads are a very useful addition in peacetime. The chief difference between the two is this: walls last for a long time because of their great size, whereas roads are soon destroyed because of the continual traffic in men and horses and, above all, the traffic in those heavy Tartarian carts, which I strongly wish that Erichthonius had never invented.39 These carts not only damage the streets, the foundation of buildings, and the peace of those living in them, but they also disturb the thoughts of those wanting to meditate on the good. Therefore, I ask you to turn your attention to the streets of Padua, which have for a long time been neglected and broken up and which, with their silent deformity, call out for your assistance. I think that you will want to tackle this difficult task, not just because you are responsible for the city and its inhabitants. I know that the beauty of Padua and the well-being of its citizens ought to be—as they are—close to your heart, but the repair of the streets is in your own interest as well. For I have never known anyone—and I am not only speaking here of princes but of every sort of men—except perhaps your own dear father, who liked to ride on horseback, as you do, into every part of his country for such long stretches of time. I am not criticizing this habit of yours since your first duty and care is clearly the good government of Padua, and the presence of a good prince is always pleasing to faithful citizens; but you ought to take care that what you do so eagerly you also do safely. Hence you should remove all danger and difficulties from this horseback-riding and turn it into an agreeable and pleasant recreation.

Entrust, therefore, the repair of Padua's streets to some good

38. *Scriptores historiae Augustae* 26.39 2
39. An allusion to Erichthonius, the son of Vulcan, king of Athens, who is credited with being the first man to hitch four horses to a chariot; see Vergil *Georgia* 3.113ff

man who is dedicated to your own welfare and that of the city. And don't be afraid that by appointing a well-known and noble man to this seemingly vile job you are inflicting harm on him. To an honest and upright citizen no duty that results in benefit to his country can ever seem base. History provides an example of this truth. There was in Thebes a very brave and learned man named Epaminondas, who was—if we count virtue alone and not just good luck, which often raises up the unworthy—the leading man, or at least one of the leading men, of Greece. Now this man, about whom it has been written truly that with him the glory of Thebes was born and with him it died, was opposed by his fellow citizens—such evils often occur in democratic states—who appointed him to the job of street cleaner, which was in Thebes regarded as the dirtiest job of all.40 The citizens hoped thereby that they would diminish the glory and good reputation attached to this man. But Epaminondas did not respond to this punishment with force, or even with a harsh word. Rather, he readily accepted the task assigned to him and said: "I shall undertake this task not with the idea that an indignity has been visited upon me as a result of this job, but rather that it has brought me dignity so that in my hands something very noble will be created out of a task that has always been viewed as base and ignoble." And soon, indeed, the job gained such a good reputation under his splendid administration that a task which has previously been despised, even by the lowest of the plebs, now became a post sought after even by the most illustrious citizens.41 Now I hope you will entrust this same task to some industrious and honest citizen of Padua and that you soon will see that many compete for this job, and thus, aided by the zeal of the citizens, the old homeland will be made good as new.

Now I am going to write concerning a matter that seems almost ridiculous and that I have already discussed with you one day recently when you came to visit me in my study at Arqua, an honor that you have paid me often, even though I am unworthy of such

40. See Justinius *Epitome historiae Philippicarum* 6.89.33; Cicero *Tusculaneae disputationes* 1.24; and Valerius Maximus *Factorum et dictorum memorabilium libri* IX 3.7. ext 5 Petrarach used the same sources in a discussion of Epaminondas in his *Rerum memorandarum libri* 17 (Billanovich, pp 6–7).
41. See Valerius Maximus 3.7 ext 5
little concerning those things that a prince ought to do. Surely that indulgence in banquets and circus games and the exhibiting of wild and exotic animals is useless; these things may provide a brief delight and momentary pleasure to the eyes, but indeed they hold nothing honorable or worthy for the eyes of a good prince. Hence, I would recommend that a good prince avoid these things even though they are adjudged pleasing by the insane and vulgar mob. In this instance I cannot bring myself to admire the policy of the ancient Roman leaders who, even though they recognized the vanity of these things, staged these vulgar games in order to curry favor with the people, and thus depleted the treasury and diverted the money for other than intended uses. But if I were to speak of leaders who had lapsed in their own time into these sorts of errors and narrated the flights of madness of each one, my discussion would surely soon become disorganized and not at all germane to my topic. Therefore, I return at once to the main subject.

Now when a ruler has decreed that his people are to be burdened with some new tax, which he will never want to do unless in times of public need, he should make all understand that he is struggling with necessity and does it against his will. In short, he should argue that, except for the fact that events compelled him to levy the tax, he would gladly have done without it. It will also redound to his good reputation if he will have contributed some of his own money to the new tax. Thus he will show that he, the head of the people, is but one among them, and at the same time he will demonstrate his great moderation. This is exactly what the Roman Senate did during the Second Punic War, following the advice of the consul Valerius Laevinus, and this act has been remembered with great admiration by many generations. However high it is, the execution will always be judged lighter and milder. Although it was not spoken by a good prince, yet let us not forget the excellent advice he is said to have written to provincial officials who recommended burdening the provinces with new taxes: “Good shepherds ought to shear their sheep but not skin them.” And if such a saying applied to Roman provinces, should it not also apply to one’s homeland? Because I wish you to be compared only with the best and most outstanding of princes, I beg you to imitate this policy and follow the example of those just words and deeds which have merited great praise. When your tax collectors, therefore, offer you hope of large profits, follow the example of Antoninus Pius, of whom it is written that he was never pleased by any income gained at the expense of his provincial subjects. How much less should you want to cause any harm to your own subjects? Similarly, Constantius uttered a laudable sentiment: “I would rather have the public wealth distributed among my subjects than closed up in my treasury.” Now his policy has two rationales. First of all, it is better for riches to be held and enjoyed by many than by one person, and, second, it is more useful for private citizens to earn money from their own industry. What is a treasury but an inert and useless mass of metal heaped up on account of greed? Who cannot see that the wealth of the citizens is also the wealth of the prince? And it is viae versa, as Lucan writes: “The poverty of a servant is harmful, not to the servant, but to the master.”

And there are other even easier ways of gaining your subjects’ affections—ways that are, I admit, difficult for a haughty prince, but in those cases where the prince’s temperament tends toward humane behavior these methods are easy and pleasant. For instance, you have a tale that is told as follows: “Hadrian liked to visit twice or three times a day the sick, now of the equestrian order, now of the class of freedmen. These he revived with consolation, and he raised up their spirits with encouraging words. He always invited some of them to dine at his own table.” Now who can there be with such a terrible disposition that he would not be moved by such solicitous acts by his lord? And no one is more well endowed with these qualities than you are. Hence, all you have to do is to follow your own good instincts and everything you want will come to you. So be compassionate to those who are suffering from sickness or some other misadventure, and, if you

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60 Suetonius Tiberti 32.
61 Eutropius Historiae ab urbe condita 10.1.
62 Eutropius Historiae ab urbe condita 10.1.
63 Suetonius Tiberii 32.
can, you ought to give them some help. But I do not doubt that you already act in this way. For who except a barbarian would remain unmoved when exhorted to help those whom he loves.

Furthermore, just as the love of the people is gained more easily by mercy and generosity than by any other quality, so, conversely, nothing is more guaranteed to provoke a people’s hatred than cruelty and greed. If you compare the two evils you will see that while cruelty is harsher, greed is much more common. Cruelty is harsher but it only afflicts a few people, while greed is not so harsh but it affects everyone. Innumerable tyrants and princes have been undone by these two vices and made themselves hated and maligncd through the centuries. But it is not necessary to speak with you concerning the vice of cruelty at any length because you are not merely a stranger to it but positively opposed to practicing it. Thus I would judge that nothing would be more difficult than for a merciful person such as yourself to commit, or even to consider committing, a cruel act against someone else. Cruelty is the quality of an ignoble, capricious, and treacherous person—someone quite different from yourself—a person quick to wreak vengeance when the possibility is offered. This vice is foreign to human nature and especially alien to the dignity of a prince, whose power to mete out vengeance is sufficient revenge. For this reason that short saying of Hadrian has been admired for a long time. Speaking to one who had been his mortal enemy when he was a private citizen and who now, seeing Hadrian emperor, was justly afraid and awaited all kinds of punishment, Hadrian said with a placid brow: “You have escaped.” But no more about this need be said, except that it seems to me that humanity is the high expression of human nature. Without this a person is not only not good but, indeed, cannot even be called a man.

It is more difficult, however, to banish greed completely from one’s character. What person is there who does not lust after something? But I beg and beseech you that since, by God’s grace, you have the means of leading a magnificent style of life, you will always hold a lustful appetite in check. Greed is insatiable, inexhaustible, and infinite, and whoever is governed by greed loses his own property while he desires that of another. Do you, perhaps,

wonder at this opinion? This much is certain: whoever desires something very much and does not get it often forgets what he already has. Thus inattentive persons lose their way, and, intent on riches, they do not perceive immediate dangers; indeed, I don’t think a mortal life can suffer an evil greater than this one. You ought not say to yourself what so many others do: “I am all right for the moment, but what is going to become of me later on?” Isn’t this worrying about what is going to happen many years hence rather silly when no one knows what the next hour may bring? Leave aside these useless preoccupations, for it is written: “Abandon yourself to the care of the Lord and He will nourish you, and He will never let the righteous be shaken.” Why do you waver? Why do you fear? Why do you worry? Don’t you know that the Lord cares for you? You have a good shepherd; He will never fail you, He will never desert you. Again, it is written: “Reveal your needs and go to the Lord and place your trust in Him, and He will care for you.” Now some may say that this is good advice for monks but not for princes. Such a ctitic does not understand, however, that princes ought to adhere to God and love and put their trust in Him because they have received more great benefits from Him. It is a kind of ingratitude to expect only a little from Him who has given you so much. God is the one who has nurtured you from infancy and who will care for you until the last God will never abandon hope in you whom He did not abandon even when you could not hope in Him; indeed, even while you were growing larger in your mother’s womb.

Once you have overcome this difficult evil of greed, I shall show you another sort of greed that is generous and above reproach; you must lust after the treasure of virtue and win the fame of outstanding glory. This is a property that moths and rust cannot corrupt, nor can thieves steal it in the night.” Now, except in the case of war (as has recently happened to you) or in the event of some unavoidable difficulty, you should avoid anyone who wants his lord to take over property at the expense of others. Indeed, such

64. *Scrip toris historiae Augustae* 1.17.1

65. Ps 54:22 (Vulgate numbering).
66. Ps 36:5–6 (Vulgate numbering).
68. Another allusion to the border war fought against Venice in 1372–75. See n 4 above.
urgings are the practice of almost all courtiers. Hence, you should view persons who advise such a policy as the enemies of your good reputation and mortal soul. Such evil courtiers arouse their lords so that as they steal and pillage the property of others, thus earning the hatred of their subjects and this iniquitous kind of men so oppresses the people and deceives their lords that they bring to ruin both their lords and themselves. Concerning such matters, there is that true and famous saying of Marius Maximus—as Flavius Ammianus records it in his history of the Emperor Alexander—and these are his very words: "The state in which the ruler is evil is happier and almost more secure than the one in which he has evil friends; for, indeed, one evil man can be made better by many righteous men, but in no way can many evil men be held in check by one man, however righteous he may be." 69 Hence, this Alexander was a good prince, for, besides his own innate virtues of character, he also had, as the same historian writes, friends "who were upright and respected, never spiteful, or thieving, or seditious, or cunning, or leagued together for evil, or hateful to the righteous, or lustful, or cruel, or deceivers of their prince, or mockers, or desirous of hoodwinking him like a fool. But on the contrary, they were upright, revered, temperate, pious, fond of their prince, men who neither mocked him themselves nor wished him to become an object of mockery by others, who sold nothing, who lied in no matter, who falsified nothing, and who never tricked their lord so that he might love them." 70 So, according to this author, such are the friends whom a prince ought to want and seek out. The other type ought to be avoided like the plague by the prince and to be excluded from his circle as though they were public enemies. These courtiers are the masters of evil arts who have never known and always hated good morals. Moreover, these men are eager to teach the greedy ways they so like to their own princes, so that if the princes are persuaded to follow their evil ways, they can be transformed into the worst of men. For if greed is an evil in the private citizen, how much worse is it in princes.

Just as a prince has such a capacity for harming, and just as contempt for base things is a very fine quality in a prince, so a prince's greed and desire for treasure and riches is very ugly. Not without good reason, that very wise emperor Marcus Aurelius (whom I have had occasion to mention earlier) used to say: "In an emperor avarice is the most grievous of all evils." 71 For this failing alone did Pertinax and Galba suffer on account of their cruelty. Therefore, all those who love virtue and wish to have a good reputation should avoid and despise the evil of greed. But, most of all, princes should avoid greed because they are the leaders of men and in their care has been placed vast sums and much property as well as the state itself. And if they will administer their governments properly, they are certain to consider wealth foul corruption and obtain the treasures that are most prized, namely, an easy and clear conscience and the love of God and of their fellow men. Those who follow their own desires will only come to ruin, for they will never satisfy their insatiable desires and they will surely earn the hatred of God and of men. Both the consensus of the wise and experience itself—that infallible mistress of truth—teach that greed for wealth is never extinguished but only grows stronger. Concerning this question the best advice was given by Epicurus, who said that to become rich one did not need to increase his property but rather to curb his own desires. 72 Hence it is obvious that those things that are called riches are not really riches, for if they were, they would really make one rich, but they do not. In fact, all the treasure under the sun will not make one rich. Rather, consider the brief and modest axiom that in abandoning greed we approach nature more closely.

Indeed, there are many ways of acquiring money (as Aristotle points out in the Economics), 73 and to these the courtiers of the princes of our own age have added innumerable other methods. Consequently, the Philosopher now seems to have been quite unlearned in these matters. But these talents ought to be despised and condemned by a good prince, just as he ought to hate anything instituted for mere expediency to the detriment of justice. Rather, he ought to keep in mind that precept of the most learned and wisest of men: Nothing can be useful that is not at the same time just and honorable. 74 In the case of some courtiers, when they are

69. Scriptores historiae Augustae 18.65.4.
70. Scriptores historiae Augustae 18.66.2.
71. Scriptores historiae Augustae 6.8.2
73. See Aristotle Economics 2.1345b5-1346b4f.
74. Cf. Cicero De officiis 2.3.11.