Moral and Political Essays

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Introduction

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On Mercy was composed for Seneca's pupil the young emperor Nero, to celebrate the start of his principate, to admonish him on how to conduct it, and to stress the need for mercifulness in all his dealings. The work describes him as 'eighteen years old' (i 9. 1). Since Nero was born on 15 December, AD 37, it will thus have been written between December 55 and December 56. Unfortunately, it also credits him with the 'magnanimous boast' that in the whole world he has 'not shed one drop of human blood' (i 11. 3). This has inspired attempts by some scholars to date the work earlier. For Nero, who was proclaimed emperor in October 54, had already, in early 55 AD, arranged for his step brother by adoption, Britannicus, to be poisoned;¹ Seneca can hardly himself have been ignorant of the crime, and the claim which he puts into Nero's mouth makes the young emperor look scandalously hypocritical. But we do not know how widely reports of Nero's guilt may have circulated at the time among the reading public, for whom Seneca was writing. For On Mercy was not only a work of advice for the young emperor; it was also intended to reassure that wider public about the character of the new regime² and

² See Griffin, p. 138. Much of what follows is heavily indebted to the chapter 'Ideology for a New Regime' (pp. 129–71).
to show that Nero’s adviser was by no means as harsh in his attitudes as Stoics were commonly thought to be (11 5. 2). 3

Subject and organization

Seneca refuses to give a single definition of his subject, speaking of mercy as among other things, ‘leniency’, or ‘a tendency to be lenient’, ‘towards an inferior in determining punishments’ and ‘moderation in stopping short of penalties which could deservedly be imposed’ (11 3. 1). His refusal is understandable.

If acts of mercy – pardoning the criminal, sparing the vanquished enemy, and so forth – are easily recognized, Seneca’s concern is with the virtue, the specific quality of mind, expressed in such actions, that is with ‘mercifulness’. For this there was no exact Greek equivalent or available school definition. The standard translation in Greek for clementia was to be επιπεδεῖα, a term generally understood as ‘reasonableness’ in interpreting or applying the law 4 and in not pressing your lawful claims to the utmost. But the Latin concept also had much to do with προσοχή, ‘mildness’ in the control of anger, and with φιλανθρωπία ‘love of mankind’. 5 Clementia, however, had one obvious feature which made it an eminently suitable topic for an address to a prince. It was a virtue exercised towards inferiors. You can only show mercy to someone who is ‘at your mercy’; and clementia had been recognized since the time of Caesar as supremely the virtue of a conqueror or autocrat who, at least in theory, has everyone else in his power.

Seneca (11 3. 1) proposed to write On Mercy in three parts: one on leniency 6 and its value to the prince, one on defining mercy and distinguishing it from vices that somehow resemble it, and one on how to establish this virtue in the mind. Each part would probably have had a book to itself, though that is merely conjecture. On Mercy was thus planned on broadly the same lines as On Anger, a work in which theoretical questions on anger were followed by advice on how to cure it and preceded by an extended passage on its horrors. But the text, as we have it, ends after only seven chapters in Book 11. 7 Moreover, the opening discussion of leniency, of its glory and value to the prince, has a book to itself. It may seem illogical – it would certainly be contrary to the conventional procedure of philosophers – for Seneca to sing the praises of ‘mercy’ at such length before defining what quality he has in mind. But this first book is virtually a separate treatise on kingship, a most appropriate subject on which to be seen instructing the new emperor. And there would be no need to define clementia, a concept long familiar to Roman readers, so long as his purpose is simply to claim that it is the most important of all virtues for a king to possess. 8

Seneca on kingship

Book 1 of On Mercy falls itself into three main parts. 9 After the introductory address of Nero (11 1 f.), possibly our earliest example of a ‘mirror of princes’ telling a prince how to behave by praising him for already behaving as prescribed, Seneca argues, firstly (3. 2–8), that mercy, while incumbent on everyone, is above all a virtue of monarchs, a claim which he illustrates with an extended story about Augustus (9–11. 3) and rounds off by contrasting the life of a king with that of a tyrant (11. 4–13). Next (14–19), he discusses the duties of a monarch, comparing him with other figures of power – father,

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3 ‘Mercy,’ clementia, was in fact a slogan of the new reign. Nero began his principate with a show of leniency in recalling a certain Plautus Lateranus from exile, ‘pledging himself to clemency in numerous speeches which Seneca had placed in his mouth to show what honest advice he was giving’ (Tacitus, Annals XIII 11. 2).

4 Aristotle devotes a short chapter of the book on justice in the Nicomachean Ethics (11 10. 1172a18–83b) and two pages in the Rhetoric (1376a18–b23) to επιπεδεῖα so understood.

5 See Plutarch, Life of Caesar 57. 3: ‘it was thought right to decree the temple of Clemency [Επιπεδεία] as a thank-offering for his mildness’ [προσόχη]. A striking early example of [Επιπεδεία] meaning virtually the same as clementia is in Thucydides’ account of the debate on whether or not to spare the people of Mitylene (40. 2 1, 48), where the term is closely linked with ‘pity’.

6 The text here, unfortunately, is hardly intelligible and requires emendation. See n. 30.

7 Four brief and inconsequential quotations from a work of Seneca on mercy, which are not to be found in the extant essay, are preserved in a letter, apparently from 1102, of Hildebert, archbishop of Tours (J. P. Migne, Patrologia Latina, 217 vols. (Paris 1844–55), CLXXII p. 145).

8 Only in the next book, as Seneca sets about distinguishing the virtue from ‘the vices that resemble it’ (11 3.1) are clear definitions essential. As he says at 11 3.3, ‘these matters are better discussed in their proper place’.

9 With what follows, compare Griffin, p. 143.
schoolmaster, army officer, slave owner, queen (or, rather, king) bee — and showing that in all cases leniency is the best policy.

Thirdly and finally (20–4), he deals in a fairly systematic way with the principles of punishment, before concluding with a peroration on the horrors of cruelty (25 f.).

Throughout the book, the moral is the same: 'mercy enhances not only a ruler's honour, but his safety' (11. 4). These are traditional ways of recommending a course of action — Seneca is arguing per honestum et utile; and they would have their effect on a prince as vain and timid as Nero. But Seneca also argues, in more metaphysical terms, that a king is the 'mind' of the commonwealth, which he must spare as he would his own body (1 3. 5—1 5 and 1 7). Time and again, Seneca returns to the theme of the prince's special position. All men, born as they are for the common good, should be merciful and even-tempered — in this context, a certain amount of material familiar from On Anger reappears. But a prince should have these virtues to a greater extent, since his scope is so very much greater. If his virtues can do more good, his misdeeds can do more harm and earn him more hatred (18. 3). Private individuals can be excused for quarrelling; but a king cannot (7. 3) — and, anyway, he has no need to throw his weight about (21. 3). He has to be more careful than an ordinary citizen to demonstrate his disinterestedness (15. 3), since the eyes of all are constantly and constrainingly upon him — so much so that being king amounts to a 'noble servitude' (8. 1–5).

Soul and body require one another. So do prince and commonwealth — it would disintegrate without him. Seneca writes as a monarchist, accepting the historical inevitability of the principate. Elsewhere, he levels two criticisms at those who assassinated Julius Caesar for fear that he was intending to make himself king. They had not realized, firstly, that the best form of government is that under a just monarch. A Stoic, of course, could equally well be a republican — several of the school (foremost among them, Caesar's opponent, Cato the

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10 Notably in 5–7: the appeal to magnanimity in 5 (echoing On Anger 1 20 f., 11 32. 4), the reflection in 6 that 'we have all done wrong' (cf. On Anger 11 6–10, 28. 1) and the (7. 1 f.) theme of imitating the gods cf. On Anger 11 16. 2, 27. 1).

11 On Favours 11 20.

12 For the Stoics, the ideal, best form of government is a mixture of democracy, kingship and aristocracy (Diogenes Laertius vii 131). The monarchical element is found in the single, sovereign authority of human and divine reason in establishing the law and governing human affairs; while those who possess reason in perfected form are a limited group of 'best people' (aristocrats) entitled to political recognition as such. The element of democracy comes in through the idea that the whole body of true citizens under the ideal government would be persons of such perfected understanding. When differences of emphasis are allowed for, this position could obviously be applied concretely so as to defend either the senatorial or the kingly rule in Rome.

13 For numerous parallels between On Mercy and earlier Greek writing on kingship, see Griffin pp. 144 f.

14 In the Greek world there had been two styles of kingship. A king like the Spartan Agesilaus, as his ancient biographers describe him, or the Cypriote Nicoles in the speech written for him by Isocrates (Porion 111), could justify his position on the grounds of his moral excellence. But a monarch could equally present himself as the regent on earth of the gods or even as himself a deity. This was the style which Alexander the Great had copied from the kings of Persia.
in our text he told to defer to 'the Senate and people of Rome'. He may well watch over himself 'as though the laws . . . will call him to account' (1. 4); but the operative phrase here is 'as though'. Nero is fully entitled to break the law if he can save lives by doing so (5. 4). Saving lives matters more than obeying the laws or observing some political system of checks and balances. The nature of Senecan kingship comes out at its clearest in his comparison of the king with the tyrant (11. 4–13). The classic difference between them had been that the king rules, as the tyrant does not, 'according to law over willing subjects' whose rights he has to respect. For Seneca, the difference is purely moral: a king is merciful, a tyrant is not. Because of his cruelty, Sulla can be branded as tyrant, despite the fact that he stepped down from office and restored senatorial government (12. 1–3). Everything comes down to the character of the ruler, 'whatever the manner of his accession to power and whatever its legal basis' (10. 1). It may have been only realistic of Seneca to disregard the constitutional niceties in this way. But the trust which in consequence he had to place in the good nature and malleability of his pupil was to be cruelly disappointed. Soon enough, Nero kicked over the traces; and Seneca was to be remembered for his pains, by at least one writer, as τυραννοδιδοκαλος, the tyrant's teacher.16

The quality of mercy

After another flattering preamble about the emperor's kind-heartedness, Book 11 goes on to define clementia. Seneca (11. 3, 1) offers no less than five definitions: mercy means 'self-control by the mind when it has the power to take vengeance' or (2) leniency towards an inferior when punishing him, or (3) a tendency to be lenient in such cases, or (4) a 'moderation that remits something of a deserved and due punishment' or at least — and the qualification is important — (5) 'stops short of what could deservedly be imposed'. Mercy is thus a mental con-


16 Dio Cassius, LXI 10. 2.

17 This is guesswork. Securitas or 'stemness' is not discussed in the text as it survives. But see Tacitus, Annals 24. 49.

18 This summary of Stoic attitudes to pardoning and to έξειδεσια is a paraphrase of that in Stobaeus (it pp. 95. 24–96. 9 (= SF III 646). There is, however, a certain unclarity here, since 'law' in Stoic thought, could mean either the statutes of a community or it could mean the internal voice of prescriptive reason, the 'moral law' (See General Introduction, p. xxv). Stobaeus prominent goes on to define law in the latter sense, as 'right reason commanding what should be done and forbidding what should not be done' (it 96. 10–2). On this definition, the Stoic rejection of έξειδεσια is a condemnation of departures from strict morality, or rather from laws correctly enacted on that basis; it is not a doctrine of blind obedience to any old statute enacted by any old law-giver.
recting’ the written law where it was judged not to do justice to the circumstances of some particular case. But references to the written law are notably sparse in On Mercy. Seneca’s concern is primarily with cases in which there is no single punishment fixed by law. The context of the discussion in Book 11 appears to be the cœstius, the judicial investigation before the Senate or the emperor’s council of crimes for which there was no statutory penalty. It was possible there to impose, with equal justice, punishments of varying harshness. The verdict could be ‘strict’ in exacting the maximum penalty, or ‘merciful’ in settling for something less. Here Seneca’s claim that mercy is superior to forgiveness and pardon, because it is more complete, acquires some plausibility. Forgiveness means failing to punish what you have judged should be punished. Pardon is the remission of a penalty that you have judged to be due. But the function of mercy is to judge in the first place that the penalty is not due; and it can do so on a variety of grounds – not only the possibility that the malefactor was acting under compulsion or did not know what he was doing, but also considerations of his age, his social standing, his chances of being reformed, or the glory that might result from acquitting him or treating him mildly. The wise man can take all these factors into account and so do far more good to his fellow men than ever he could by just feeling pity for them.

Mercy is characterized by freedom of decision. ‘It judges not by legal formula, but by what is equitable and good’ (7. 3). Here, as in Book 1, the written laws can be disregarded. What matters is the prince’s sense of what is equitable and good. But that, in Nero’s case, was an unreliable factor. Before long, he discovered that it was quite possible to engineer trials for treason, where the Senate would obligingly propose some truly horrible punishment, and he could then show his clemency in remitting it.

Epilogue

Book 11 of On Mercy breaks off in mid-sentence. We can only guess what may have followed – or whether the work was completed at all. Seneca would perhaps have had further distinctions to make, and he could well have gone into the casuistry of mercy. At 11. 12. 3, he promised, in connection with Sulla, to deal with the question of what wrath to visit on vanquished enemies, especially if they are fellow-citizens on the opposite side in a civil war.

We can guess, too, how Seneca would have set about establishing the virtue of mercy in the mind. The second, therapeutic half of On Anger consists largely of thoughts from the earlier theoretical chapters, reformulated and amplified in such a way as to leave the strongest possible impression. Some of this material, as we saw, reappears in Book 1 of On Mercy. We can be pretty sure that it would have surfaced yet again in the last part of the treatise, reworked and enriched with numerous examples, in the attempt to turn the kindly impulses which Seneca piously detects in his pupil into a firmly and rationally grounded habit.

19 In the Rhetoric, Aristotle describes reasonableness as ‘the justice that is contrary to the written law’ (1374a26–8), in the Nicomachean Ethics as a ‘correction of legal justice’ (1137b12 f.).
20 And when they do occur it is only the emperor, not an ordinary magistrate, who is allowed to break them. See 1 § 4.
21 That is, by the prince. Seneca’s concentration on the quality of mercy in a prince leaves it unclear what scope he would allow for mercy in an ordinary citizen or magistrate – although, as we have seen, he says explicitly that mercifulness is a virtue for everybody (1 3. 2, 5. 2–3).
and obstinacy of men, which wrenches the patience from even the calmest breasts, nor even by the glory, fearsome but common among those of high command, of parading one’s power through terror. My sword has been sheathed, indeed hung away altogether. I have spared to the utmost even the mearest blood. There is no one, whatever else he may lack, who has not the name of man to commend him to my favour.

(4) My sternness I conceal, my mercy I hold at the ready. I watch over myself as though the laws, which I have summoned from decay and darkness into the light, will call me to account.\(^1\) I have been touched by the first flush of one person’s youthfulness, by another’s extreme old age. I have granted pardon to one man because of his high position, to another because of his low estate. Whenever I could find no other ground for pity, I have shown mercy to myself. This very day, should the gods demand it, I can render account for the whole human race.\(^2\)

(5) This you can say boldly out loud, Caesar, that everything entrusted to your guardianship is kept safe, that nothing has been taken from the commonwealth by violence or secret fraud on your part.\(^3\) You have aspired to the rarest of praise, praise as yet never granted to a prince — that of guiltlessness.\(^4\) Nor has that singular goodness of yours been wasted. It has found men neither ungrateful nor unfavourable in their appraisal. You have your recompense. No one human being was ever so dear to another human being as you are to the Roman people, its great and lasting blessing. (6) But the burden which you have taken upon yourself is huge. No one now speaks of our deified Augustus or the early years of Tiberius Caesar; no one seeks an example for you to imitate — apart from yourself. Your reign is being judged by the taste which we have had of it.\(^5\) This would be hard were that goodness of

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1 Seneca is having Nero proclaim ‘a return to legality after the harsh arbitrariness of Claudius’ reign’ (ibid p. 138). But note the ‘as though’. The emperor is not in fact bound by any written laws. The Stoics described kingship as ἀρχή ἀρχηγιάς, an office whose holder cannot be called to account (Diogenes Laertius, VI 122 = STP III 617).

2 Reading (with Gertz) omnia quae in fidem tutelam quo verecrt iam tuta haec<br>and (with Hosius) nihil per te neque vi neque clam <adimis> republicae.

3 A year earlier, in fact, Nero had already poisoned his brother by adoption, Britannicus, though public opinion may not yet have credited him with the murder.

4 Reading princeps tuus ad gustum igitur.
On Mercy

yours not innate but put on for the moment. No one can wear a
mask for long; pretences soon fall back into their true nature. But
anything with truth underlying it – with firm ground to sprout
from, so to speak – grows with the sheer passing of time into
something greater and better. (7) Great was the risk run by the
Roman people; it was uncertain what direction these noble talents
of yours were taking. But now the prayers of the populace rest in
safety. There is no danger of your suddenly forgetting yourself.
People, of course, are made greedy by too much good fortune. No
appetites are ever so moderate as to cease at the point of attainment.
They progress from great to greater, and the most insatiable hopes
are embraced by those who have succeeded beyond their hopes.
And yet all your citizens are now compelled to acknowledge that
they are fortunate and that nothing henceforth can be added to
these blessings, provided that they last. (8) Much constrains them
to this acknowledgment, the last that men are prepared to make:
security deep and abundant, law raised above all violations of law.
The happiest form of commonwealth meets6 their eyes, with
supreme liberty in want of nothing save the licence to ruin itself.
(9) But what, above all, has touched the greatest and the humblest
alike is admiration for your mercy. Other blessings are experienced
or expected by each, according to his circumstances, in different
degrees. Mercy inspires the same hope in all. There is no one so
satisfied at his own guiltlessness as not to rejoice that mercy should
stand before his eyes, ready for human error.

2 (1) There are some, I know, who think of mercy as a support
for the worst sort of men; superfluous except when a crime
has been committed, this is the one virtue that is inoperative among
the guiltless. First of all, however, just as medicine is of use to
the sick but is prized also by the healthy, so mercy, while invoked
by those who deserve punishment, is also revered by the guiltless.
Moreover, there is scope for it even in their case, since there are
times when luck has the same effect as guilt. Nor is it just innocence
that is aided by mercy; often virtue is, seeing that the times give
rise to actions which, while praised, can be punished. You can add
that the majority of mankind are capable of returning to innocence,

Book I

if pardoned.7 (2) It is not proper, however, to pardon as a general
rule. When you take away the distinction between the good and
the bad, the result is chaos and an outburst of vice. You need to
avoid extremes and know how to distinguish curable from hopeless
characters. Mercy should not be indiscriminate and general; but
neither should it be excluded. To pardon everyone is as much a
cruelty as to pardon no one. We should keep to a mean. The
balance, however, is hard to maintain, and any departure from
parity should tip the scale to the side of human kindness.

Division of the subject

3 (1) But these matters are better discussed in their proper place.
For the moment, I shall divide the entire material here into three
parts. The first is on relaxing your animosity, on lenience.8 The
second is to demonstrate the nature and disposition of mercy. For
since there are vices which imitate the virtues, they can only be
separated if branded with marks to distinguish them. In the third
place, we shall enquire how the mind may be led to this virtue,
how it may establish it firmly and by practice make it its own.

The excellence of mercy

Mercy the royal virtue

(2) Of all the virtues, in truth, none befits a human being more,
since none is more humane. That is a necessary point of agreement
not only among ourselves with our view that man should be seen
as a social animal born for the common good, but also among
those who give man over to pleasure and whose every word and

7 Something has fallen out after it. Something like <ignotae> (Préchac) needs to
be understood.
8 Reading, with Kronenberg, animi remissitis, a term meaning literally ‘relaxation
of mind’ – in particular, of the mind as the seat of anger. Cicero contrasts animi
remissio with securitas as an attitude which an orator can inspire (On the Orator II
72, cf. Letters to his Friends v 2. 9). Lenience and its importance to the prince
are the theme of On Mercy 1, while it discusses the nature of mercy and distinguishes
it from fallings which resemble it, before breaking off. The missing parts of the
work presumably dealt with the questions of moral training.
action looks to their own advantage. For if a man seeks calm and leisure, he acquires here a virtue which, with its love of peace and restraint on action, suits his nature. (3) Of all men, however, mercy becomes no one more than a king or a prince. What gives great might its grace and glory is its power for good; strength to harm is simply pernicious force. He alone has a firm, well-founded greatness whom all know to be not only above them but also for them, whose vigilant care for the safety of each and every one they experience every day, whose approach is not like the leap of an evil, dangerous beast from its lair, before which they scatter in flight, but rather that of a bright and kindly star. Racing each other they fly towards him, in total readiness to throw themselves on to the blades of those who lie in wait for him, to cast their own bodies to the ground if human slaughter is needed to provide the foundation of his road to safety. They watch over his sleep at night. They protect his person, making themselves a barrier to encircle it. As danger approaches, they interpose. (4) There is reason behind this unanimity of peoples and cities in their protection and love of kings, in their sacrifice of themselves and their own, whenever the safety of their commander requires it. It is not through lack of self-esteem or of sanity that thousands face the sword for one person and rescue, by a multitude of deaths, one life — sometimes that of a feeble old man. (5) Compare the way in which the body is entirely at the service of the mind. It may be ever so much larger and more impressive. The mind may remain hidden and tiny, its very location uncertain. Yet hands, feet and eyes do its business. The skin that we see protects it. At its command, we lie still. Or else we run restlessly about, when it has given the order. If its avarice masters us, we scan the sea for material gain. Its lust for glory has long since led us to thrust our right hand into the flame or plunge of our own will into the

9 The reference here is to the Stoics ('ourselves') and to the followers of Epicurus. Here, as in On the Private Life 2. 2–3, 7. 1, Seneca stresses the agreement of the two moral theories on a particular issue, despite the radical opposition of their basic principles. Elsewhere (see especially On Favours iv 2–8, 16–23) this opposition is what he emphasizes. Passages like the present one do not imply any compromise with Epicureanism or weakened commitment to fundamental Stoic doctrine.

10 Seneca is recalling the story of Mucius Scaevola (Livy, ii 13.13). See on On Favours iv 27, 2, n. 50.

11 Reading with Prêché volontari<ii in terr>am subtilissimu<s. The reference is probably to the heroism of Marcus Curtius who, to save his country, leaped on horseback into a chasm which had appeared in the Forum (Livy, vii 6. 3).

12 Reading with Leo (Herms 30. 1905, 610) uni ut animo circumdata.

13 Vergil, Georgics iv 212 f. (Dryden's translation), a passage comparing the kingdom of the bees with the monarchies of Egypt, Lycia, Parthia and Media.
as has just been shown, your commonwealth is your body and you are its mind, you can see, I think, how necessary mercy is. You are sparing yourself, when you appear to spare another. So even culpable citizens should be spared in the same way as unsound limbs. If ever there is need for blood to be let, you should stay the knife, lest it cut beyond what is needed. (2) Mercy, as I said, is natural to all human beings. Yet it most becomes emperors, finding when among them more to save and greater scope for revealing itself. How tiny is the harm done by the cruelty of private individuals! But the raging of princes means war. (3) There is, to be sure, a concord among the virtues. Each of them is as good and honourable as the other. Yet one may be more suitable to some people. Greatness of mind befits any mortal, even the poorest – is anything greater or braver than to bear back the force of ill fortune? But this greatness of mind has freer scope in good fortune, and is shown to better effect up on the magistrate's bench than down on the floor. (4) Mercy, whatever house it enters, will make it happy and calm. In a palace, its rarity renders it the more amazing. For what is more remarkable than that one whose anger has nothing to resist it, whose severest sentence commands the assent of the very people who perish by it, whom no one is going to sue or even entreat, if he has been too fiercely incensed – that this very man should take hold of himself, putting his power to better, more peaceful use with this very thought: 'Anyone can break the law in order to take a life. No one except for me can do so to save a life!'? (5) A great mind is an adornment to great fortune, but it must rise to it and stand above it – or else bring down fortune, too, to the ground. Now the characteristic of a great mind is to be peaceful and calm, looking down from above at injuries and affronts. It is for women to rave in anger, for wild beasts – and not even the noble ones at that – to bite and worry the fallen. Elephants and lions walk past what they have struck down; relentless is the mark of an ignoble animal. (6) Savage, inexorable

anger is not becoming to a king. He cannot tower much above any person on whose level he has placed himself by growing angry. But if he grants life and dignity to men who have risked and deserve to lose them, he does what none save a man of power can do. One can take the life of even a superior; one cannot grant it to anyone except an inferior. (7) To save life is the prerogative of high good fortune, never more admirable than when it attains the same power as the gods, by whose favour we are brought into the light of day, good men and bad alike. So a prince should adopt as his own the attitude of the gods. Some citizens, because they are useful and good, he should look upon with pleasure, others he should leave to make up the number, rejoicing in the existence of some, enduring that of the others.

6 (1) Consider this city where the crowd flows without pause through its broadest streets, crushed if anything stands in the way to hold back the swift current of its movement, where the capacities of three whole theatres are required at one and the same time, where produce grown all over the world is consumed – think what an empty waste there would be if nothing were left of it save those whom a stern judge would acquit? (2) How few investigators there are who would not be found guilty under the very law by which they make their investigation! How few accusers are blameless! Is anyone more reluctant, I wonder, to grant pardon than he who has all too often had reason to seek it? (3) We have all done wrong, some seriously, some more trivially, some on purpose, some perhaps under impulse or led astray by the wickedness of others. Some of us were not firm enough in our good intentions, losing our innocence unwillingly, clutching at it as we lost it. Nor have we merely transgressed – to the end of our lives we shall continue to transgress. (4) Suppose, indeed, that someone has so purged his mind as to be beyond further reach of confusion or deception. His innocence has been reached, none the less, through doing wrong.

7 (1) Having mentioned the gods, I can do no better than to make them a model for the prince: he should wish to be to the

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14 Reading aequa with Préchac.

15 Compare On Anger 1.20 ff. Note how Seneca adapts his Stoic theme. If greatness of mind is a virtue which anyone, even a slave, can exercise, nonetheless the prince has more scope than anyone for doing so. In the same way, everyone can and should imitate the gods; but the prince can do so to much greater effect.

16 Compare On Anger II 32.3.

17 Translating (roughly) Hesius' tribus eodem tempore theatris carce postulantur. The three theatres were those of Balbus, Marcellus and Pompey.

18 Compare On Anger II 10.2-6, 28, etc.

19 At 3.7.
citizens as he would wish the gods to be to him. Can it be good that the powers of heaven should be inexorably set against sin and error, hostile to the very point of our final destruction? Could any king in that case be safely assured that his limbs would not have to be gathered together by the sooth-sayers? 20 (2) But if the gods, neither implacable nor unreasonable, are not given to pursuing the crimes of potentates immediately with their thunderbolts, how much more reasonable is it for a man set in authority over men to exercise his command in a gentle spirit and to reflect: When is the world’s state more pleasing to the eye and lovelier? On a day serene and bright? Or when all is shaken by frequent thunderbolts and the lightning flashes hither and thither? And yet the look of a calm, well-ordered empire is like that of the sky serene and shining. (3) A reign that it cruel is troubled and overcast. All there tremble and start up at any sudden noise. Nor is the cause of the universal disturbance himself unshaken.

Private individuals are more easily pardoned if they avenge themselves relentlessly. They can be hurt; they are open to pain from wrongs done to them. Besides, they are afraid of contempt, and not to pay back in kind those who harm them looks like weakness, not mercy. But those to whom vengeance is easy can do without it and gain sure praise for their gentleness. (4) Men of humble position are free to use violence, go to law, rush into brawls and indulge their anger – blows between equals are slight. For a king, it hardly accords with his majesty so much as to raise his voice or use intemperate language.

8 (1) You may think it hard that kings should be deprived of that freedom in speaking which even the humblest enjoy. ‘This is slavery,’ you may say, ‘not supreme command.’ What! Are you not aware that this supreme command means noble slavery for you? 21 The situation is different for those who lurk in the crowd without leaving it, whose virtues have to fight long to come into the open and whose vices have the cover of darkness. But what you say and do is seized on by rumour; and that is why none should care more

20 I.e. after having been struck by lightning.

21 Reading, with Wilamowitz, istud noblem esse tibi servitatem. The phrase ‘noble servitude’ was that of the Macedonian king Antigonus II (cf. Aelian, Varia Historia ii 20), who may have been echoing the views on kingship of the Stoic philosopher Perseus.

about their reputation than those whose reputation, whatever their deserts may be, is going to be great. (2) How much there is that you are forbidden but we, thanks to you, are allowed! I can walk without fear wherever I will in the city, with no escort to follow me, with no sword either at home or at my side. You, in the peace that you guarantee, must live under arms. You cannot escape your lot. It besets you; wherever you descend, it follows you with its mass of trappings. (3) The slavery of being supremely great lies in the impossibility of ever becoming anything less. But this constraint is one which you share with the gods. They too are held bound to the heavens. No more is it granted to them than it would be safe for you to come down. You are fixed to your pinnacle. (4) When we move, few notice. We can go, come back, change costume unnoticed by the public. You have no more chance than the sun of not being seen. A flood of light meets you face to face, and the eyes of all are turned towards it. 22 You think you are setting out – in fact, you are rising. (5) You cannot speak without your voice being heard by the nations everywhere; you cannot show anger without everything trembling at it, since you cannot strike anyone without throwing whatever is around him into turmoil. When thunderbolts fall, few are endangered, but all are terrified. In the same way, punishments by mighty potentates cause more terror than harm – and not without reason: it is not what he has done, but what he may do, that people consider in the case of one who can do anything.

(6) Consider this, too. Private individuals are likelier to have wrongs done to them by putting up with wrongs which already have been done. For kings, however, the surer way to security is through gentleness, since frequent punishment, while it crushes hatred in a few, arouses it in everyone. (7) The wish to rage should cease, sooner than the occasion. Otherwise, in the same way that trees which have been chopped down sprout again with a multitude of branches and many plants are pruned to make them grow thicker, the cruelty of a king increases the number of his enemies by removing them. Parents and children of those slain, kinsmen and friends, take the place of each single victim.

22 Reading, with mss, nulla contra te lux est. The image, familiar in Egyptian pharaonic iconography, is that of the monarch turned towards the sun, illuminated