

Séneca contra Iram

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He that is slow to anger is better than
the mighty; and he that ruleth his
spirit than he that taketh a city.

PROVERBS 16:32

In Molière's *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* (1670), M. Jourdain wishes to quickly learn how to become a gentleman. But his "instructors," the Music Teacher, the Dancing Instructor, and the Fencing Master get into a sordid quarrel amongst themselves about who is the more professional and important. Another professor, The Philosopher, enters and rebukes them for such bickering.

*Hé quoi? Messieurs, faut-il s'emporter de la sorte?
et n'avez vous point lu le docte traité que Sénèque a
composé de la colère? Y a-t-il rien de plus bas et de
plus honteux que cette passion, que fait d'un homme
une bête feroce?*¹

¹ Act II, scene iii, in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Georges Couton, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 2.724.

(Come now, sirs, must you conduct yourselves in this way? Haven't you read the learned treatise that Seneca wrote On Anger? Is there anything more base and shameful than this passion which turns man into a ferocious beast?).

He exhorts them to use "reason," to rise above insults, and to display "patience" and "moderation" in all their conduct. However, the quarrelsome Trio commences to insult the Philosopher and *his* calling- and in a trice the Philosopher flies into a rage, shouting epithets and begins to pummel them all. Seneca himself would have appreciated the humor here, for no mannot even Moliere's Philosopher-is wholly exempt from the powerful lure and the immoderate, destructive force of anger.²

Seneca's writing of the *De Ira* was, in all probability, initially motivated by the cruel, uncontrolled temperament of the Emperor Caligula, whose irrational anger destroyed many Romans, including the intelligentsia of his day.³ Seneca himself became a victim of Caligula's wrath. Jealous of the Philosopher's distinguished literary, oratorical, and political achievements, the mad Caligula, contemptuously describing Seneca's works as "mere school exercises" and his style as "sand without lime," ordered him put to death. This mandate would have been carried out, had not one of Caligula's mistresses remarked that it was useless to kill a man who was soon about to die of tuberculosis.⁴

The *De Ira* was written between 41 and 49 A.D., during Seneca's exile -an exile, ironically inflicted upon him by the rashness and wrath of another Emperor, Caligula's successor, Claudius. Having had first-hand experience of the injustice and hardship caused by anger, Seneca presents at length in the *De Ira* a thorough analysis of what he describes as the most hideous and violent of all the emotions.

Anger is a condition of the soul whose outward appearance is as turbulent as is its inner disorder.

² Seneca wishes to counteract those philosophers in the past who were noted for their toleration and even praise of anger. He makes a point of disagreeing with Aristotle who had viewed anger as an incentive to courage and bravery (see *De Ira* 1.9.2; 1.17.1; and 3.3.1).

³ For Seneca's portrayal of Caligula, see Anna LYDIA MOTTO and John R. CLARK, "Exemplary Villains in Seneca's Prose," *Bolletino di Studi Latini* 23 (1993) 309-319.

⁴ Dio Cassius 59.19.7.

*Ceteris [adfectibus] ...aliquid quieti placidique inest, hic totus concitatus et in impetu doloris est, armorum sanguinis suppliciorum minime humana furens cupiditate...*⁵

(In the other emotions there is some peace and quiet, but this one is totally excited and impelled by resentment, raging with an inhuman passion for weapons, blood, punishments...)

...impotens sui est, decoris oblita, necessitudinum immemor; in quod coepit pertinax et intenta, rationi consiliisque praeclusa, vanis agitata causis, ad dispectum aequi verique inhabilis...

(De Ira 1.1.2)

(...it is lacking in selfcontrol, forgetful of decorum, heedless of kith and kin, stubborn and intent upon whatever it has begun, closed to reason and advice, agitated by insignificant causes, unable to see what is right and true...).

Moreover, anger is an ugly, horrid, and detestable sight. Wild and furious beasts, Seneca sardonically remarks, are less hideous in appearance than the *vir iratus*⁶. For violence that takes hold of the mind affects the countenance too.

...flagrant ac micant oculi, multus ore toto rubor exaestuante ab imis praecordiis sanguine, labra quatiuntur, dentes comprimuntur; horrent ac surriguntur capilli, spiritus coactus ac stridens, articularum se ipsos torquentium sonus, gemitus mugitusque et parum explanatis vocibus sermo praeruptus et conplosae saepius manus et pulsata humus pedibus et totum concitum corpus 'magnasque irae minas agens'...

(De Ira 1.1.4)⁷

(...his eyes blaze and flicker, a redness suffuses his whole face as his blood boils over from the lowest depths of his heart, his lips quiver, he grinds his teeth, his hair bristles and stands on end, his breathing is strident and short, his muscles quiver and twitch, he groans and bellows, his speech bursts forth with words hardly comprehensible, he repeatedly strikes his hands together and beats the

⁵ De Ira 1.1.1; cf. 3.4.13. Hereafter, reference to quoted passages from Seneca's writings will be cited, within parentheses, within the body of this paper. All translations are our own.

⁶ De Ira 3.4.3.

⁷ See also De Ira 2.35.36; 2.36.13; 3.4.13.

ground with his feet, his whole body is agitated, 'anger producing mighty threats'...).

Here indeed is a most effective portrayal of the angry man-a figure that has obviously captured Seneca's imagination, not only in his prose writings, but also in his dramas. Virtually all of his plays depict some character or characters who lose control and explode into frenzy. Clearly the most memorable is Atreus, in the *Thyestes*. In that masterpiece, Seneca most vividly presents the destructive force of unappeasable choler and resentment.⁸

Anger, Seneca warns, is a vice that afflicts all classes of human beings -the rich and the poor, the foolish and the wise, ordinary citizens and heads of state:⁹

...admoneam ...alia animi mala ad pessimos quosque pertinere, iracundiam etiam eruditis hominibus et in alia sanis inrepere?

(*De Ira* 3.4.5)

(...may I admonish you that other ills of the soul pertain to those who are the worst of men, but wrath creeps upon even those who are erudite and sane in other matters?)

The ghastly sight of the angry man resembles madness.¹⁰ In fact, Seneca, like Horace, describes anger as a temporary madness: *Ira furor brevis est*.¹¹ And Seneca goes even further, regarding it as madness itself.

...ingentis irae exitus furor est, et ideo ira vitanda est non moderationis causa, sed sanitatis.

(*Ep.* 18.15)¹²

(...the outcome of excessive anger is madness, and so anger should be avoided not for the sake of moderation, but of sanity.)

⁸ Consult Anna LYDIA MOTTO and John R. CLARK, "Seneca's *Thyestes* as Melodrama," *RSC* 26 (1978), 26378; and Gregory ALLAN STALEY, "Ira: Theme and Form in Senecan Tragedy" (diss., Princeton, 1975).

⁹ *De Ira* 3.2.1.

¹⁰ *Ep.* 114.3.

¹¹ Horace, *Ep.* 1.2.62; cf. Seneca, *De Ira* 1.1.2.

¹² Cf. *De Ira* 1.18.6; 2.25.1; 2.36.56; 3.1.5; 3.2.5; 3.3.6; 3.28.1.

Throughout the ages, the Angry Man has been portrayed as one easily and suddenly wrought up, as fickle and spontaneous -ironically, as one mild in some matters, but inflammatory about others, and, overall, a Madman. In the 1660s Samuel Butler writes thus about “A Choleric Man”:

...as his present Condition stands, he has more full Moons in a Week than a lunatic has in a Year. His Passion is like Tinder, soon set on Fire, and as soon out again. The smallest Occasion imaginable puts him in his Fit, and then he has no Respect of Persons, strikes up the Heels of Stools and Chairs, tears Cards Limbmeal without Regard... His Temper is, like that of a Meteor, an imperfect Mixture, that sparkles and flashes until it has spent it self. All his Parts are irascible, and his Gall is too big for his Liver. ...and as soon as his Anger is over with others he begins to be angry with himself and sorry. He is sick of a preposterous Ague ...He is never very passionate but for Trifles, and is always most temperate where he has least Cause...¹³.

Such a contradictory and oscillating figure would be funny, if he were not so violent, and his actions so often cruel and the results so dire.

Discussing the nature of ire, Seneca maintains that such a passion is *contra naturam*. For man in his natural state is peaceful, kindly, and happy; whereas the irate man is cruel, unbalanced, and punitive: “*ergo non est naturalis ira*”¹⁴. In fact, ire is, in the words of Sir Roger L’Estrange,

...the most outrageous, brutal, dangerous, and intractable of all passions; the most loathsome, and unmannerly...¹⁵.

Other emotions are seductive and gain mastery over the soul more slowly, but anger comes on speedily and in full force: “*Cetera vitia impellunt animos, ira praecipitat*”¹⁶.

¹³ Samuel BUTLER, *Characters*, ed. Charles W. Daves (Cleveland and London: Press of Case Western Reserve Univ., 1970), pp. 22122. Consult Benjamin BOYCE, *The Theophrastan Character in England to 1642* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1947).

¹⁴ *De Ira* 1.6.5; see also 1.5.13; 3.5.6.

¹⁵ “Seneca of Anger,” chap. 1 in *Seneca’s Morals By Way of Abstract*, 6th ed. (New York: John W. Lovell n.d.), p. 201.

¹⁶ *De Ira* 3.1.4; cf. 2.36.6.

No plague, Seneca maintains, has been more destructive to the human race than anger -a wild, pernicious vice (*ferum ac perniciosum vitium*),¹⁷ the greatest of evils, the one surpassing all the others (*maximum malum... omnia superans vitia*)¹⁸. From it comes murder, crime, warfare, bloodshed, poisonings, the utter ruin of families and friends, the annihilation and downfall of cities¹⁹. Those afflicted with anger

Mortem liberis, egestatem sibi, ruinam domui imprecantur...
Amicissimis hostes... legum... immemores, ad minima mobiles,
non... adiri faciles, per vim omnia gerunt, gladiis et pugnare parati
et incumbere.

(*De Ira* 2.36.5)

(Call down death upon their children, poverty upon themselves, ruin upon their house; hostile to their best friends, heedless of every law, roused by trifles, unapproachable, they do everything with violence, prepared to fight with the sword or to fall upon it.)

Moreover, anger is the one passion capable of seizing a nation as a whole, leading the masses of men to rush headlong into disastrous warfare and civil strife.

...impotentia una est malum publicum. Saepe in iram uno
agmine itum est; viri feminae, senes pueri, principes vulgusque
consensere, et tota multitudo paucissimis verbis concitata ipsum
concitatorem antecessit; ad arma protinus ignesque discursum est et
indicta finitimis bella aut gesta cum civibus... rupto iure gentium
rabiesque infanda civitatem tulit...

(*De Ira* 3.2.3-5)²⁰

(...violent wrath is the one and only vice that infects an entire people. They march into anger *en masse*. Men and women, old and young, the rulers and the mob band together, and the whole crowd, roused by very few words, outstrips the instigator himself; they rush off at once to arms and fires; wars are declared against their

¹⁷ *De Ira* 1.2.3.

¹⁸ *De Ira* 2.36.6.

¹⁹ *De Ira* 1.5.3; 3.3.26; 3.5.46; 3.25.4; 3.28.23; 3.41.3.

²⁰ Cf. *De Ira* 3.19.5.

neighbors or waged against their own fellow citizens...; international laws are violated and unspeakable madness sweeps the state away...).

Even in one of his playful odes, Horace makes this very serious point:

*irae Thyesten exitio gravi
stravere et altis urbibus ultimae
stetere causae, cur perirent
funditus...*²¹

(anger struck Thyestes down with severe destruction and has been the prime reason why lofty cities utterly perished...).

Learned scholars and critics often refer to a renowned author of a particular genre as their ideal model -to a Vergil or a Homer, for example, as the supreme masters of epic poetry. Alexander Pope ironically utilizes this tradition in his *Peri Bathous* (1728), when he alludes to Richard Blackmore as the Father of the Bathos, the master of bad poetry. With similar irony and sarcasm, Seneca provides throughout the *De Ira* examples of men who excel as models of irrational anger and unbounded fury²².

The tyrants of Persia are a favorite troop of examples. Cyrus once raged against and flogged the River Gyndes in a fit of anger²³. Cambyses, when a close friend counselled continence in drinking, took sudden umbrage, deliberately became heavily intoxicated, and then slew his friend's son²⁴. Another Persian ruler was more cruel than that and, like Atreus, slew his advisor's children and had them fed to the unwary father at a banquet -and for what reason? Because the heinous overlord was angered by the poor man's advice²⁵. Darius, too, slaughtered the three sons of an honorable nobleman simply because the father expressed concern for their lives, and Xerxes did just the same with one son

²¹ *Od* 1.16.1720.

²² See also Anna Lydia MOTTO and John R. CLARK, "Seneca on Cruelty," *Maia* 46 (1994) 273-279.

²³ *De Ira* 3.21.14.

²⁴ *De Ira* 3.14.16.

²⁵ *De Ira* 3.15.13.

²⁶ *De Ira* 3.16.34.

that a father sought to have spared²⁷. Cambyses was known, while seeking vengeance and absolute dominance in Syria, to have cut off the noses of an entire population²⁸.

Nor is such conduct, alas, restricted to those whom the Greeks would term "barbarians." Alexander, dubiously known as "the Great," behaved just like a Persian satrap; and once at a drunken feast slew in a fit of anger his best friend²⁹. One of his successors, Lysimachus, did much the same, mutilating a friend and keeping the poor disfigured creature locked in a filthy cage³⁰. Moreover, as Seneca wryly notes, there is little cause for Romans to consider themselves more civilized. For they as well, alas, are all too capable of perpetrating the same outrageous deeds. Sulla, for example, had been instrumental in the brutal death and dismemberment of one of the noble Marius family³¹. As might be expected, however, Seneca's number one exemplar of furious deeds is the recently-deceased Emperor himself, Gaius Caligula. He is mentioned most often, throughout the pages of the *De Ira*, as the primal instance of cruel and barbarous behavior. On almost no pretext, he once had an entire villa destroyed at Herculaneum³². Like the Persians, he destroyed a son when the father, a nobleman, asked for clemency; and then, the bereaved mourner, ordered to attend a banquet, dared not refuse -because he had another son still living³³. This Emperor was known to torture and butcher innumerable Roman senators and knights³⁴, and once had even the craven audacity to challenge Jupiter to a duel when a trifling pantomime he was attending was disrupted by storm and lightning³⁵. Indeed, he so wreaked havoc amongst the Roman aristocracy, that murder and mayhem became mere common-places. At the height of his lunacy, he wished aloud that all the Roman people had but a single neck, so that with one final stroke of the sword,

²⁷ *De Ira* 3.16.4. In all of these tales where a tyrant slaughters the son of a friend or loyal citizen, there is a strain of irony such losses are to be expected when one deals with angry kings. On this subject, consult Gerard B. LAVERY, "Sons and Rulers: Paradox in Seneca's *De Ira*," *AC* 56 (1987), 27983.

²⁸ *De Ira* 3.30.12.

²⁹ *De Ira* 3.17.12.

³⁰ *De Ira* 3.17.24.

³¹ *De Ira* 3.18.12.

³² *De Ira* 3.21.5.

³³ *De Ira* 2.33.34.

³⁴ *De Ira* 3.18.3 19.5.

³⁵ *De Ira* 1.20.89.

he could destroy the entire race!³⁶. Seneca cynically remarks that by detailing the outrageous deeds of these vicious men, he is by no means digressing from the subject of anger. For their deeds are the epitome of the destructiveness and fury of ire.

Non enim Gai saevitiam, sed irae, propositum est describere, quae non tantum viritim furit sed gentes totas lancinat, sed urbes et flumina et tuta ab omni sensu doloris converterat.

(*De Ira* 3.19.5)

(Indeed, it is not my purpose to describe the savagery of Gaius, but the savagery of ire, which not only rages against individuals, but which tears whole nations to pieces, which violently assaults cities and rivers and inanimate objects that are safe from every feeling of pain.)

Indeed, because anger is so detrimental to man's nature, it should not be employed at any time, not even if there is just cause for its arousal. For wrath, itself a vice, cannot cure the evils prevalent in the world. The *sapiens* restrains himself from wrath since he knows that

Sine illa facilius rectiusque scelera tollentur, mali punientur et transducentur in melius.

(*De Ira* 2.13.3)

(Without it, more readily and more justly will crimes be eliminated, and will evil men be punished and led to a better way of life.)

We should therefore reject even the first incitement to anger.

Nam si [ira] coepit ferre transversos, difficilis ad salutem recursus est...

(*De Ira* 1.8.1)

(For if anger begins to carry us away, the return to safety is difficult.)

Moreover, anger, when hardened into hatred, becomes incurable.³⁷

In cases of wrong-doing, we should first try to improve a human being by persuasion and gentle words; then by sterner language; and lastly by mild punishment; harsh punishment should be reserved only for harsh crimes. Moreover, even extreme punishment should be administered without wrath. For man's true nature is rational, kindly, and feels pathos whatever the situation may be, whereas anger is ferocious and seeks revenge³⁸.

Anger is the antithesis of reason. The latter is level-headed (*aequalis est ratio*)³⁹, the former, wholly off-balance (*in totum inaequalis est*)⁴⁰; the one indulges its passion regardless of truth, the other strives to learn the truth⁴¹. Anger is loud, boisterous, unseemly, heaping insults and curses upon its victim; reason is calm and collected, quietly and silently punishing those who deserve to pay the penalty; unlike anger, reason does not gnash its teeth, it does not frantically toss its head, it does not violently stamp its feet⁴². Reason, man's highest good, is sufficient in itself to accomplish any task: "*sine hac [ira] per se ad rerum effectus sufficit ratio...*"⁴³. And what joy the rational man experiences when he has mastered himself.

*Quantum est effugere maximum malum, iram, et cum illa
rabiem, saevitiam, crudelitatem, furorem, alios comites eius adfectus!*

(*De Ira* 2.12.6)

(How great it is to escape anger, the greatest ill, and with it
madness, ferocity, cruelty, rage, and the other emotions that accom-
pany it!)

As William S. Anderson remarks, the essence of Seneca's advice in the *De Ira* is that

³⁶ *De Ira* 3.19.12.

³⁷ *De Ira* 3.41.3.

³⁸ *De Ira* 1.6.15.

³⁹ *De Ira* 1.17.5.

⁴⁰ *De Ira* 1.17.7.

⁴¹ *De Ira* 1.18.12.

⁴² *De Ira* 1.19.12.

⁴³ *De Ira* 1.8.5; see also 1.9.14; 1.10.14.

...no sane man should seek the insanity of indignation, but take as his goal something commensurate with the highest nature of man, *tranquillitas animi*. Juvenal himself recognized this and in his later Satires created a new satirist in close conformity with the Senecan ideal⁴⁴.

Although it is difficult, man can, through training and discipline, banish anger from his soul. For

...nihil est tam difficile et arduum quod non humana mens vincat...

(*De Ira* 2.12.3)

(...nothing is so difficult and arduous that the human mind cannot conquer it...)

Human beings can surmount incredible obstacles through constant practice and persistence: some have restrained excessive drinking, others have eliminated love affairs, others have, without becoming tired, extended their waking hours, some have learned to balance themselves on tightropes, to hold their breath under water while diving to the bottom of the sea, and to lift huge weights. Thus men, by persevering, can overcome difficulties and learn to control their weaknesses and vices⁴⁵.

In this instructive manual *contra iram*, Seneca offers his fellow-men sound advice on how to conquer anger during all periods of their life. In fact, more than half of this treatise is devoted to the presentation of remedies for anger. With profound insight and deep understanding of the human psyche, Seneca imparts to his reader common-sense solutions that will help control wrath.

With regard to anger and other faults, it is most important that children receive wholesome training as early as possible⁴⁶:

⁴⁴ ANGER in JUVENAL and SENECA (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1964), p. 173.

⁴⁵ *De Ira* 2.12.46.

⁴⁶ *De Ira* 2.21.1.

...facile est enim teneros adhuc animos componere, difficulter reciduntur vitia quae nobiscum creverunt.

(*De Ira* 2.18.2)

(...for it is easy to shape minds that are still young but vices which have matured in us are removed with difficulty.)

Youngsters should be granted some relaxation but should not be over-indulged, pampered, or spoiled:

...nihil enim magis facit [pueros] iracundos quam educatio mollis et blanda.

(*De Ira* 2.21.6)

(...nothing indeed renders children more prone to tantrums than training that is soft and permissive.)

Those given sound training from the very beginning will be less prone to wrath. And here Seneca presents a most interesting, effective prescription for the education of the child:

...audiat [puer] verum. Et timeat interim, vereatur semper, maioribus adsurgat. Nihil per iracundiam exoret... Exprobrentur illi perperam facta. Pertinebit ad rem praeceptores paedagogosque pueris placidos dari. Proximis adplicatur omne quod tenerum est et in eorum similitudinem crescit... Apud Platonem educatus puer cum ad parentes relatus vociferantem videret patrem: 'Numquam,' inquit, 'hoc apud Platonem vidi.'

(*De Ira* 2.21.89)

(...let the child hear the truth. Let him even at times be fearful, let him always be respectful, let him rise before elders. Let him never get what he wants by being angry... Let him be reprimanded for wrongdoing. Children should be given teachers and tutors who are calm by nature. Every youngster attaches himself to those nearest to him and becomes like them... When a young boy, educated in Plato's Academy, returned to his parents and beheld his father shouting he remarked: 'I never saw such conduct at Plato's house.')

Just as children should be taught not to indulge in anger, so adults, at all periods of their life, can, if they wish, learn how to control this vice, so pernicious to themselves and to others. One of the best remedies for anger, Seneca writes, is delay: “*Maximum remedium irae mora est*”⁴⁷. Plato is said to have strictly followed this precept, never administering punishment to others when he himself was angry⁴⁸. Delay and the passing of time diminishes anger and reduces its impetus⁴⁹.

The sensible man knows that there is no end of the causes of anger and will therefore not allow rage to overwhelm him. He will teach himself to scorn the trifling and the insignificant matters that needlessly enrage human beings -a slave’s carelessness or mismanagement of duties, disturbing loudness and incessant noise⁵⁰, the misbehavior of children, the disobedience of animals, the defects of material objects⁵¹, suspicions that have no real foundations⁵², greed that engulfs us and causes us to become angry at those who have more and even at our very benefactors when they give largesse to anyone else⁵³. A man of common sense, therefore, will adopt policies throughout his life to help him curb his anger. Wherever possible, he will favor clemency and forgiveness over harshness and cruelty. “*Quanto humanius mitem et patrium animum praestare peccantibus...*”⁵⁴ (“How much more human to offer to those who go astray a kind and fatherly spirit...”). Like the Greek philosophers Democritus and Heraclitus, he will either laugh or weep at human affairs (“*Aut ridenda omnia aut flenda sunt*”) rather than resort to anger⁵⁵. He will recollect that the masses of men frequently err and that it is better to pardon and to forgive them than to become angry at them: “*generi humano venia tribuenda est*”⁵⁶ (“pardon must be granted to the human race”). Moreover, he knows that he must restrain his ire for the sake of his own sanity:

⁴⁷ *De Ira* 2.29.1; cf. 3.12.4: *Maximum remedium irae dilatio est...*

⁴⁸ *De Ira* 3.12.57; cf. Diogenes Laertius 3.3839.

⁴⁹ *De Ira* 3.27.5; 3.32.2.

⁵⁰ *De Ira* 2.25.14.

⁵¹ *De Ira* 2.26.16.

⁵² *De Ira* 2.22.24; 2.24.12; 3.12.1; 3.30.1; 3.34.13.

⁵³ *De Ira* 3.31.1; 3.33.3.

⁵⁴ *De Ira* 1.14.3.

⁵⁵ *De Ira* 2.10.5.

⁵⁶ *De Ira* 2.9.4.

*Si tantum irasci vis sapientem, quantum scelerum indignitas
exigit, non irascendum illi sed insaniendum est.*

(*De Ira* 2.9.4)

(If you wish the wise man to become as angry as the indignity of crimes demands, he must not only be angry, but he must also become mad.)

*Qui non irascitur, inconcussus iniuria perstitit, qui irascitur,
motus est.*

(*De Ira* 3.25.3)

(He who does not get angry stands firm, unshaken by injury; he who gets angry is emotionally shaken up.)

By reflecting that few, if any, human beings are perfect, that we have all, at one time or another, erred, we will be less prone to become irate at the flaws of our fellow men⁵⁷. And the thought of our own faults, when considering the faults of others, will help stay our wrath.

*Non est autem prudentis errantis odisse; alioqui ipse sibi
odio erit.*

(*De Ira* 1.14.2)

(It is not characteristic of a prudent man to hate those who err; if he does, he will be hateful to himself.)

In offering remedies *contra iram*, Seneca urges us to contemplate what most stirs our anger, so that we may avoid its sudden onslaught. Just as nature gives indications of a storm before the storm itself rages, so there are certain symptoms of anger prior to its ferocious onset.

Prodest morbum suum nosse et vires eius antequam spatientur opprimere.

(*De Ira* 3.10.4)

(It helps to know one's illness and to suppress its strength before it spreads.)

⁵⁷ *De Ira* 2.10.23; 2.28.18; 3.25.2.

Some men are so touchy, that almost any irritation goads them to wrath. Their spirit is as weak as a bodily sore which throbs under the slightest touch⁵⁸. They should seek remedies to overcome this disease and to improve their temperament. If they know what their weakness is, they can find a remedy for it⁵⁹.

For example, those who are quicktempered should by all means avoid activities that are too many and too nerve-wracking.

...ut quietus possit esse animus, non est iactandus nec multarum... rerum actu fatigandus, nec magnarum supraque vires adpetitarum.

(*De Ira* 3.6.6)⁶⁰

(...in order that the mind can be tranquil, it must not be agitated, nor must it be worn out by too many activities, and large tasks that are beyond its strength.)

Instead, they should find time to calm their soul with soothing arts-poetry, music, historical tales. For “*mentes aegras studia laeta permulcent*”⁶¹ (“joyous pursuits calm sick minds”). They should also avoid fatigue, hunger, and thirst, since physical exhaustion debilitates the soul, causing it to become bitter and enraged⁶². By maintaining *mens sana in corpore sano*, the individual can train himself to eliminate or at least to conceal his wrath. For Seneca makes a telling point: if a man, being angry, will but train himself to mask and control all of anger’s outward signs, eventually the wrath itself will be conquered and will subside⁶³. Socrates was well aware of this strategy and, in fact, resorted to jesting and buffoonery as a coverup for his anger. He laughed when his wife, Xanthippe, poured dirty water on him, just as he did when Aristophanes in the *Clouds* falsely portrayed him as atheist and sophist⁶⁴.

⁵⁸ *De Ira* 3.9.5.

⁵⁹ *De Ira* 3.11.3.

⁶⁰ Cf. *De Ira* 3.7.12.

⁶¹ *De Ira* 3.9.2.

⁶² *De Ira* 3.9.45.

⁶³ *De Ira* 3.13.17.

⁶⁴ *De Cons. Sap.* 18.5; cf. *De Ira* 3.11.2.

We should associate with those who have learned how to subdue their own wrath; such men are not only less prone to provoke the wrath of others, but can also teach others how to overcome anger.

Elige simplices, faciles, moderatos, qui iram tuam nec evocent et ferant.

(*De Ira* 3.8.5)⁶⁵

(Choose honest, easy-going, and moderate companions, who will tolerate your anger but not incite it.)

They will help us understand that most sources of anger offend us more than they actually harm us⁶⁶, that we are often disturbed by frivolous and trifling things⁶⁷, that we permit unfounded suspicions to embitter and to anger us⁶⁸. Above all, let us train our mind to meet bravely and without ire whatever happens⁶⁹, remembering that he who has committed wrong against another has already punished himself⁷⁰.

Finally, nothing will assist us in refraining from anger as much as the recollection of our mortality.

Sibi quisque atque alteri dicat: 'Quid iuvat tamquam in aeternum genitos iras indicere et brevissimam aetatem dissipare?'

(*De Ira* 3.42.3)

(Let each one say to himself and to others, 'Why does it give us pleasure, as if we were going to live forever, to invoke wrath and to waste the brief time of our life?')

... venit ecce mors quae vos pares faciat... ...victo victorique finis... quidem maturus immineat.

(*De Ira* 3.43.12)

⁶⁵ Cf. *De Ira* 3.39.14.

⁶⁶ *De Ira* 3.28.46.

⁶⁷ *De Ira* 3.30.1.

⁶⁸ *De Ira* 3.20.2.

⁶⁹ *De Ira* 2.31.16; 3.37.3.

⁷⁰ *De Ira* 2.30.2.

(...lo and behold, death comes who makes you equal...
...indeed, a speedy end hangs over victor and vanquished.)

In the words of Ezra Pound,

... death closes our eyelids,
.....
Moving naked over Acheron
Upon the one raft, victor and conquered together,
Marius and Jugurtha together,
one tangle of shadows⁷¹.

ABSTRACT

In the *De Ira*, Seneca presents a thorough analysis of anger, which he describes as the most violent and ugly of all the emotions –a condition of the soul whose outward appearance is as turbulent as its inner disorder. It is a vice that afflicts all classes of human beings– the rich and the poor, the foolish and the wise, ordinary citizens and heads of state. It is *contra naturam*. For man in his natural state is peaceful and kindly whereas the irate man is unbalanced, irrational, cruel. No plague has been more harmful to the human race than anger. From it comes murder, crime, warfare, the ruin of family and friends, the downfall of cities. Seneca, however, maintains, that although it is difficult, man can, through training and discipline, banish anger as well as other vices from his soul. With profound understanding of the human psyche, our Cordoban Philosopher imparts to his reader common-sense solutions that will help control wrath.

⁷¹ “Homage to Sextus Propertius,” VI, lines 15, in *Personae. Collected Shorter Poems of Ezra Pound* (London: Faber and Faber, 1952), p. 227.