SENSECA ON ANGER

“The wise man will not be angry with wrongdoers. Why? Because he knows that the wise man is not born but made, he knows that very, very few turn out wise in the whole expanse of time, because he has come to recognize the terms that define human life—and no sane man becomes angry with nature. That would be as pointless as choosing to wonder why fruit doesn’t hang on woodland briars, or why brambles and thorn bushes aren’t filled with some useful fruit. No one becomes angry when nature defends the vice. And so the wise man—calm and even-tempered in the face of error, not an enemy of wrongdoers but one who sets them straight—leaves his house daily with this thought in mind: “I will encounter many people who are devoted to drink, many who are lustful, many who are ungrateful, many who are greedy, many who are driven by the demons of ambition.” All such behavior she will regard as kindly as a doctor does his own patients. When a man’s ship is taking on a lot of water, as the joins buckle and gape on every side, he surely doesn’t become angry with the sailors and the ship itself, does he? Rather, he runs to help—keeping the water out here, bailing it out there, plugging the gaps he can see, working constantly to counter the unseen gaps that invisibly draw water into the bilge—and he doesn’t leave off just because more water takes the place of all the water he drains. Prolonged assistance is needed against constant and prolific evils, not so they cease, but so they don’t gain the upper hand.

An objection: “Anger is useful because it keeps you from being despised and frightens off the wicked.” In the first place, if anger is as powerful as it is threatening, it’s also hated, on account of the very fact that it arouses fear; but it’s more dangerous to be feared than to be despised. On the other hand, if it’s impotent, it’s more vulnerable to contempt and doesn’t escape mockery; for what’s more feeble than anger huffing and puffing to no purpose? In the second place, it’s not the case that certain things are more powerful for being frightening, and I wouldn’t want a wise man to be told that being feared, which is part of a wild beast’s armory, is also a weapon for the wise. Fever, the gout, a bad sore are all feared, aren’t they? But there’s not a drop of good in those things, is there? Quite the contrary, all things that are despised, disgusting, and base are for that very reason feared. Thus anger is ugly per se and not at all formidable, but it’s feared by many as an ugly mask is feared by infants.”


SENSECA ON ANGER

“The wise man will not be angry with wrongdoers. Why? Because he knows that the wise man is not born but made, he knows that very, very few turn out wise in the whole expanse of time, because he has come to recognize the terms that define human life—and no sane man becomes angry with nature. That would be as pointless as choosing to wonder why fruit doesn’t hang on woodland briars, or why brambles and thorn bushes aren’t filled with some useful fruit. No one becomes angry when nature defends the vice. And so the wise man—calm and even-tempered in the face of error, not an enemy of wrongdoers but one who sets them straight—leaves his house daily with this thought in mind: “I will encounter many people who are devoted to drink, many who are lustful, many who are ungrateful, many who are greedy, many who are driven by the demons of ambition.” All such behavior she will regard as kindly as a doctor does his own patients. When a man’s ship is taking on a lot of water, as the joins buckle and gape on every side, he surely doesn’t become angry with the sailors and the ship itself, does he? Rather, he runs to help—keeping the water out here, bailing it out there, plugging the gaps he can see, working constantly to counter the unseen gaps that invisibly draw water into the bilge—and he doesn’t leave off just because more water takes the place of all the water he drains. Prolonged assistance is needed against constant and prolific evils, not so they cease, but so they don’t gain the upper hand.

An objection: “Anger is useful because it keeps you from being despised and frightens off the wicked.” In the first place, if anger is as powerful as it is threatening, it’s also hated, on account of the very fact that it arouses fear; but it’s more dangerous to be feared than to be despised. On the other hand, if it’s impotent, it’s more vulnerable to contempt and doesn’t escape mockery; for what’s more feeble than anger huffing and puffing to no purpose? In the second place, it’s not the case that certain things are more powerful for being frightening, and I wouldn’t want a wise man to be told that being feared, which is part of a wild beast’s armory, is also a weapon for the wise. Fever, the gout, a bad sore are all feared, aren’t they? But there’s not a drop of good in those things, is there? Quite the contrary, all things that are despised, disgusting, and base are for that very reason feared. Thus anger is ugly per se and not at all formidable, but it’s feared by many as an ugly mask is feared by infants.”