Pardon and Revenge in Suetonius and the Historia Augusta

Senecan and Jacobean revenge tragedies, and novels such as Moby Dick, show how irrational, pathological and self-destructive the pursuit of vengeance can be. Yet the pursuit or attainment of revenge can do much to reduce anguish, restore mental equilibrium and a sense of honour and worth, and protect against fear, anxiety and depression. Julius Caesar did not cut his hair or beard when his commander, Titurius, and his forces were killed by Gauls. In this way he honoured the feelings of anger and grief such a loss inflicted. Only vengeance could assuage the anguish he felt for the men he so loved.1 But if revenge can offer a path to mastery, repute and a way of humiliating others, so can pardon, as some recipients of Caesar’s dictatorial clemency doubtless pondered. Pardon can be bestowed for self-interested, reputation-enhancing motives. It may, as Oscar Wilde observed, be the sweetest form of revenge. Pardon and revenge are concepts difficult to define and both have a problematic relationship with justice.2 Pardon for a wrongdoer can leave others feeling

1 Divus Julius 67.2. To put it another way, the rage and hate felt by the would-be avenger is preferable to feelings of guilt, fear and loss. By seeking revenge we assert that we are not intimidated and that the other should fear us. See C. Socarides, ‘On Vengeance: the Desire to Get Even’ Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association 14 (1966), 165-77; M. Daniels, ‘Psychological Vindictiveness and the Vindictive Character’, Psychoanalytic Review 56 (1969), 169-96; F. Heider The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations (New York, 1958), 268.

2 See, for example, S. Jacoby, Wild Justice: the Evolution of Justice (New York, 1983), 1-9. Jacoby points out some of the problems that occur in modern society when punishment by the state fails to answer people’s need for vengeance and asserts that it is only a modern assumption that justice and revenge are mutually exclusive. Psychoanalytically, the same dynamic impels the drive for justice/punishment or revenge. See Socarides On Vengeance (as in n.1) and J. Pingleton, ‘Why We Don’t Forgive: a Biblical and Object Relations Theoretical
very aggrieved, still thirsting for justice or revenge in the belief that a wrong against them or against society has been excused or condoned. Even if retribution for an offence is meted out in a relatively impersonal, judicial way so that punishment rather than revenge seems to be applied, vengeful feelings may still be very much present.

This study is based on a number of keywords, such as *venia*, *ignosci*, *ultio* and *vindicare*, which makes it both more and less than a study of pardon and revenge in the two biographers. Less, because instances of pardon and revenge can occur in our authors without the keywords being used, and so not every relevant incident is considered. More, because some occurrences of the keywords may be used in senses that do not really include pardon or revenge. However, there is a certain security in remaining with the keywords and not venturing into speculation about episodes where pardon or revenge could, hypothetically, be involved. Drawing the line between, for example, revenge and punishment, is difficult enough even when working with the keywords. Likewise, Latin words for ‘pardon’ can have meanings closer to ‘permission’ and ‘leniency’ than ‘forgiveness’.

Ideas about what is permissible revenge and laudable pardon, the extent to which one should let go of grievances and curb destructive impulses, are among the core values of any society and individual. Excessive revenge may become sheer villainy but limited or culturally condoned forms of vengeance can play an important role in the well-being of a group and provide limits to aggression. States have a role to play in

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3 Cf. T. Govier, ‘Forgiveness and the Unforgivable’, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 36 (1999), 59-76, who distinguishes secondary (relatives and friends) and tertiary (a wider group or society) victims who might find it harder to forgive the pain and suffering they experience, especially if the primary victim is dead.

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reducing conflict and promoting harmony in society, taking retribution out of the hands of individuals as far as possible, in effect making the state become the avenger under the guise of impersonal punisher and preventing endless cycles of crime and aggression. Punishment applied to the offender by the state may induce a remorse that makes forgiveness from victims easier. Legal terminology is frequently and unsurprisingly coloured by words for revenge. Some of the unwritten rules about the exaction of revenge come to be written. Others may become the unwritten prerogatives of arbitrary autocratic power. Suetonius and the author of the *Historia Augusta* may or may not be representative of their epochs and of prevailing ideologies but some delineation of their thinking on such matters and some comparison of their attitudes should be possible. Autocratic regimes can do much to reduce tension and fear by the generous bestowal of pardon and clemency, even remodel the legal system in an environment where having enemies and wanting to harm is considered honourable, in contrast to Christian teaching which regards such attitudes as inappropriate.

At Rome, the character of the autocrat and the degree of restraint exercised by him were matters of great moment. Contemporaries could be harmed by the ruler’s lack of restraint and could be disgusted by the

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5 J. Harries, *Law and Empire in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge 1999), 77.

6 On clemency in Suetonius, see K. Bradley, ‘Imperial Virtues in Suetonius’ *Caesares*, *Journal of Indo-European Studies* 4 (1976), 245-53. On clemency in the *Historia Augusta* see J. Beranger, ‘L’idéologie impériale dans l’Histoire Auguste’ in *Bonner Historia-Augusta-Colloquium 1972/4* (Bonn, 1976), at 29-54; M. Cesu, ‘La vita alexandri nell’ Historia Augusta’, *QUCC* 42 (1992), 149-53. In listing the desirable qualities of a new emperor, military tribunes addressing troops are made recommend someone who is *fortis, sanctus, verecundus, probus*—and *clemens* (Prob. 10.4: cf. 22.1), qualities which would apply to paragons like Pius and Marcus. The fact so many of the *Historia Augusta* lives are largely or wholly fictitious means the author’s observations and anecdotes are all the more gratuitous and, therefore, revealing.
sycophancy of flatterers and the corruption of language that pretended excesses were not occurring. Faith in the legal system and the moral order is weakened when cruelty is paraded as clemency and when private vengeance is pursued in the name of the public good. Such absurdity and hypocrisy detracted from the dignity and majesty of high office.

The concept of pardon is part of a nexus that includes forgiveness, amnesty, mercy, excuse, condonation, reprieve, indulgence, restraint, moderation and pity, any one of which could be present in an act of pardon. Associated Latin words not used as keywords here include *moderatio*, *mansuetudo*, *concessio*, *lenitas* and *misericordia*. Frequently involved in any experience of giving or receiving pardon are justice, guilt, shame, courage and trust. Some offences may be simply unforgivable and not recognising the seriousness of an offence may be moral stupidity. sparing or forgiving a person can be risky because generosity can be abused or secretly despised. Seneca can elevate clemency to the position of chief imperial virtue and tell Nero that it is imperial clemency that offers the best security for emperors (*De Clementia* 1.8), but the proto-emperor Julius Caesar found that sparing his enemies did not ensure his safety. Some opponents of Caesar no doubt regretted that Sulla showed clemency to the young nobleman in the 80s BC (*Divus Julius* 1.2-3). Expediency, desire for reputation, hypocrisy, selective pardon that seeks to divide and rule, a bestowal of pardon that is distinct from genuine forgiveness and absolution, all these may be involved in any act of *venia*. The sentiment might be *do ut des* if the need should arise. Refusal or failure to exact vengeance need not amount to any sense of absolution. It may be simply deference to the opinions, indeed fervent convictions, of others, including the public at large. Bestowal of pardon can be a signal demonstration of one's power, confidence, even arrogance, a public relations exercise. Identification of motive, something that can be explored in philosophical treatises, plays, novels and large-scale biographies, is not something we

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7 See Govier *Forgiveness* (as in n.3), who argues that where remorse, acknowledgment of injury, and change of character are present, even the most heinous offences can be forgiven. It is easier to forgive a person of similar status, according to R. Roberts, 'Forgiveness' *American Philosophical Quarterly* 32 (1995), 289-306. Unintended harm often has to be forgiven too.
can expect from our imperial biographers. Nevertheless, factors that induce pardon, such as close relationship to the offender, his or her suffering or repentance, common status or group membership, a loftiness of soul that does not deign to avenge, a philosophical commitment to control anger, a humane modification of the law such as when people offend through ignorance (Aug. 33.2), can often be recognised. But regardless of motive, a display of (apparent) forgiveness can be genuinely inspirational and does much to enhance the reputations of Titus, Pius and Marcus. Genuine forgiveness can dissolve the chains and poisons of anger and resentment.

The keywords for pardon that were used to generate references in our authors were as follows. The figures in brackets are the number of occurrences in each author, Suetonius first. Abolitio, in the sense of amnesty (1-0), amnestia (0-1), venia (19-13), ignosci (3-7), clemens (2-7), clementer (0-2), clementia, excluding the Historia Augusta’s addresses to Diocletian and Constantine as tua clementia (8-19), indulgere used in the sense of forgive rather than favour or indulge (2-1), indulgentia used likewise (0-6), impune (0-2), impunitas (4-3). Total for Suetonius: thirty-nine; total for the Historia Augusta: sixty-one. The Historia Augusta is about fifty-seven per cent longer than Suetonius’ De Vita Caesarum, so the relative frequency of the keywords is about the same. The material contained in the references can be analysed in various ways. Sometimes there is simply a brief passing reference to or comment about pardon that does not permit analysing any interaction. But usually one can identify a person or group who seeks or needs pardon from another party, and why.

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8 Tacitus is a historian willing to do just this.

9 And the latter avoids the Stoic trap of trying to achieve justice without emotion/pity. See A. Burnett, Revenge in Attic and Later Tragedy (Berkeley, 1998), 272. On seeking to outdo rivals in the arena of forgiveness, see D. Quint, Montaigne and the Quality of Mercy (Princeton, 1998), 24.

Furthermore, there is often some reported comment by participants or by the author on the episode. Comments can extend to general or hypothetical situations, not just specific and actual ones. Negative examples, that is failure to grant or gain pardon, can be instructive. References to revenge can be sifted through in the same way.

In Suetonius’ thirty-nine references, seekers of pardon can be identified in eighteen. They are a fairly disparate group, ranging from emperors (six times: this may be surprising but is explained below) and senators, through conspirators, assassins, forgers and astrologers, to scribes and freedmen. Suetonius reports a story that Claudius even considered issuing an edict granting *venia* to anyone breaking wind *in convivio* (*Claudius* 32) but this a hypothetical rather than actual example. Of thirty-six seekers in the *Historia Augusta*, emperors occur eight times, as do senators and their relatives. Conspirators, prophets and a thief figure too. The remainder are quite different from Suetonius: urban, provincial and ultralimitane peoples, soldiers, a farce writer, Zenobia, men condemned by Hadrian.

Those from whom pardon is sought or required in Suetonius range from the dictators Sulla and Julius Caesar, the emperors Augustus, Tiberius and Domitian (nine times altogether), through the senate, to a circus audience and the people of Ostia from whom Claudius seeks forgiveness for his irascibility (*Claudius* 38.1). In the *Historia Augusta*, out of the thirty-six sought, emperors provide thirty, senate, senators and magistrates six. More so in this author is the emperor the locus of power and potential source of pardon. Acts or behaviour in Suetonius requiring pardon in the eyes of contemporaries or the author range from serious and criminal acts such as assassination, conspiracy and having an affair with the chief Vestal Virgin; the scandalous rather than criminal, such as Nero playing his lyre in public; the dangerous such as practising astrology or speaking abusively about or to an emperor; the less serious such as forgery; and the trivial, Tiberius using a foreign term (*monopolium*) in the senate and apologising for it (*Tiberius* 71). For not only marrying the daughter of Sulla’s foe Cinna but refusing to divorce her, Caesar had to go into hiding and only obtained *venia* through the efforts of Vestal Virgins and kinsmen. Eminent supporters of Sulla had pleaded on Caesar’s behalf to no avail, and when he did finally relent, Sulla warned that there were
many Mariuses in Caesar and hence sparing him would destroy the optimates (*Divus Julius* 1.2-3). Being on the other side in a civil war, especially the losing side, put one in need of clemency. Afranius and Faustus obtained *venia* from Caesar, repaid his generosity by fighting against him at Pharsalus, and were slain in battle. Later Caesar allowed those whom he had not yet pardoned to return to Italy and hold magistracies and military commands. Nero not only granted Locusta a full pardon (*impunitas*) for helping him poison Britannicus but rewarded her and sent her pupils (*Nero* 33.3). In an unusual show of clemency, Domitian allowed a former praetor to escape death and go into exile for illicit relations with the chief Vestal because the evidence of witnesses was inconclusive and the man confessed (*Domitian* 8.4). *Venia* in the sense of amnesty was granted by Claudius to all who in the two day interregnum on the death of Gaius had proposed a different form of government from monarchy, but not to some of the tribunes and centurions involved in the assassination of Gaius (*Claudius* 11.1). Pardon was thus limited and conditional. Claudius wanted not only to discourage regicide but to punish those who had demanded his own death.

Suetonius' Augustus changed from the ruthless Octavian who had refused to spare six hundred of Perusia's most eminent men and became a merciful emperor. In a chapter that contains examples of his *clementia* and *civilitas*, Suetonius notes that Augustus, not only granted *venia*, *incolumitas* and high office to those who had opposed him in the civil war (*Augustus* 51.1), but let off with light punishment two plebeians and a slave who had made abusive and threatening remarks about him (*Augustus* 67.1). Vespasian was likewise *clemens* towards people who were rude and insulting and who explored the limits of imperial forbearance. If to no-

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11 *Divus Julius* 75.3. On Suetonius' treatment of *clementia* in the life of Caesar, see M. Lossau, 'Suetons *Clementia Caesaris*’ *Hermes* 103 (1975), 496-502. Lossau detects four thematic elements, covering 73, 74, 75.1-3, and 75.4-5, and argues that Suetonius, writing under an emperor, Hadrian, who combined severity with indulgence, was alert for similar contrasting behaviour in Caesar. Cf. *Divus Julius* 65.
one else, emperors had to defer to public opinion, offer excuses and seek pardon in order to remain in good standing, as Augustus does when unable to attend the circus (Augustus 45.1). Nero supposedly sought to win venia from the public for his lyre playing by saying that one day it would help him earn a living if driven from the throne (Nero 40.2). When that very prospect was at hand, Suetonius says that among the options he considered was to don black and publicly beg for venia for his misdeeds, maxima miseratoin. Although Suetonius retails abundant evidence for his shamelessness and indifference to criticism (cf. Nero 51), he also brings out a thirst for popularity and public esteem (cf. Nero 53) in a way from which, say, the more dignified Augustus was free. When Tiberius sought venia for using the Greek word monopolium in the senate he was driven more by a pedantic sense of propriety rather than by seeking to maintain or repair a relationship. But he showed a concern for relationships when he first apologised to Haterius Agrippa for intemperately opposing him in debate and then justified his behaviour to the senate (Tiberius 29).

Acts or behaviour in the Historia Augusta that require pardon range from the serious and criminal like revolt, conspiracy, supporting an unsuccessful usurpation or opposing a succession, making apocalyptic prophecies; through situations that were unwise or unfortunate, such as prematurely hailing Caracalla emperor (Septimius Severus 18.10), being related to an emperor’s rival and refusing admission to a visiting Hadrian when ill; to less serious crimes such as theft. Claudius Gothicus showed some honour and generosity to his defeated and slain rival, Aureolus, sufficient to be called clemens (Trigiuta Tyranni 11.5: he built a tomb and bridge in Aureolus’ name). The cities of Alexandria and Antioch which had supported the usurpation of Avidius Cassius were forgiven by Marcus, though in the case of Antioch the Historia Augusta reports that, initially angry, he took away their games and other ornamenta before restoring them. Later the Antiochenes were spared harsh treatment from Aurelian


13 Avidius Cassius 9.1. Angry self-affirmation may be necessary before granting of forgiveness is possible. We know from Marcus’ Meditations that his proneness to anger was a concern for him (cf. P. Brunt, ‘Marcus Aurelius in his Meditations’
when they returned to his power from that of Zenobia (Aurelius 25.1). Marcus was only too keen to spare Avidius, treated some of his relatives generously, and lamented that he could not complete his reign without shedding a senator’s blood (Marcus Aurelius 26.3, Avidius Cassius 13.2). Once having won a reputation for clemency, there could be an emotional stake in preserving it. The desire to spare Avidius makes this case a hypothetical rather than actual instance of clemency but accords with the author’s insistence that Marcus displayed this imperial virtue in abundance. Perhaps a little strangely to us, he sees as proof of Marcus’ outstanding clemency that Avidius’ sons were exiled and lost some of their inheritance. Civiles and lenes successors to Pius, Marcus and Verus took no action against the barbs of a farce writer (Marcus Aurelius 8.1), and Marcus gave venia to a man who made repeated prophecies of Rome’s destruction. Although impunitas can have the sense of pardon, like venia and clementia at times, it can mean an enforced and grudging inaction rather than the positive sense of absolution that Marcus is said (questionably) to have displayed towards the memory and relatives of

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\text{JRS 64 (1974), 1-20, esp. 11-12). Forgiveness can, amongst other things, be a way of denying anger and satisfying a sense of grandiosity, and, just like revenge, be a way of resisting helplessness and loss. See D. Davenport, ‘The Functions of Anger and Forgiveness’ Psychotherapy 28 (1991), 140-4, and Pingleton, ‘Why We Don’t Forgive’ (as in n.2). Brunt also brings out Marcus’ concern for his reputation: ‘On fame he protests too much’ (14).}
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\[14\] This is just what Avidius is made to allege of Marcus in a fictitious letter to his son-in-law. He is critical when he goes on to lament the damage being done to the state by this and by the loss of disciplina maior (Avidius Cassius 14.1-8). Relevant is an episode involving Severus Alexander, although it is hard to take the author entirely seriously here (Severus Alexander 28.1-5). After illustrating what a severissimus iudex Alexander could be, he tells of a man who was guilty of several offences and was a client of certain reges amici. The man was handed over to the kings for conviction and punishment (crucifixion) and thus, says the author, Alexander’s precious reputation for clemency was preserved.

\[15\] Marcus Aurelius 13.6. Cf. Tiberius’ treatment of astrologers, not a complete comparison because of the different nature and scale of the threat they posed to public order (Tiberius 36.1).
Avidius. Pertinax spared the consul Falco for plotting against him and sought *impunitas* for him from the senate but perhaps would not have been so lenient if his own position had been stronger (*Pertinax* 10.1-7).

In looking at how pardon was sought, the nuances of words such as *venia* are brought out. When Claudius, through certain senators, seeks *venia* from the senate to marry Agrippina, or Marcus seeks *venia* for a consulship for the fifteen year old Commodus, the word has the sense of permission, with a possible undertone of apology for the irregularity involved. In a letter to the senate in 117 when he *veniam petit* for not waiting for the senate’s approval of his accession, Hadrian in effect apologised to them. His excuse was that the troops hastily acclaimed him because an interregnum was intolerable (*Hadrian* 6.2). A similar sense of being excused or exempted from a requirement occurs when Pertinax and Valerian decline a governorship and censorship, respectively (*Pertinax* 3.10, *Valerian* 6.9). An admission of guilt or offence, being tantamount to an apology and being difficult to do because of the perceived shamefulness of such a step, makes a degree of pardon easier to grant, especially if it is accompanied by a promise to reform, as astrologers do under Tiberius. In seeking *venia* for a failed revolt against Gordian III in 240, conspirators, having been thwarted from their coup by the governor of Mauretania, not only confessed their *crimina* but handed over their leader Sabinianus (*Tres Gordiani* 23.4). When the seeking of pardon is not explicitly mentioned (it may, however, be inferable from the nature of the pardon gained) one is left uncertain whether an approach was made (and by whom) or whether the initiative rested with the bestower who might see the advantages of conciliation (e.g. *Quadriga tyrannorum* 11.2) or be too weak to exact revenge. In the case of a failed usurpation or revolt, the offenders’ need for mercy did not have to be spelt out but the need of a usurper’s kin, however guiltless they might be, might have to be made explicit. In the case of Avidius it was Marcus, prompted or unprompted, who asked the

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17 *Claudius* 26.3, *Commodus* 2.4. Cf. *Heliogabalus* 34.2, the author begging for permission to write about the disgusting Elagabalus.
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senate to grant *venia* to them (*Avidius Cassius* 12.2-10, and what seems to us elementary justice). Customary means of seeking pardon, such as sending envoys or petitions are recorded (*Marcus Aurelius* 14.4, *Pertinax* 3.10). In the case of Claudius and Galba, approaching their associates to obtain a pardon stood a good chance of success.

Pardon gained takes various forms, from the passive failure to take action against an offender, through an unexpectedly mild response such as a verbal rebuke, to a more active gesture of reconciliation or mercy, which may include a formal amnesty, even advancement or enrichment. Perversely, Tiberius gets a decree passed celebrating his clemency in not having Agrippina strangled and her corpse exposed (*Tiberius* 53.2: cf. *Domitian* 11.2). Caesar ‘mercifully’ cuts the throats of the pirates who had captured him before crucifying them (*Divus Julius* 74.1). Opellius Macrinus called himself merciful because sometimes he only centesimated rather than decimated his troops (*Opellius Macrinus* 12.2). Such ‘mitigations’ are really negative examples, not pardon at all.

Comments about pardon that are clearly authorial glosses can be of a generalising nature, such as Pius or Marcus being at all times ready to pardon, that Zenobia could show the clemency of a good emperor when *pietas* required (*Trigiuta tyranni* 30.6), and that *clementia* was the *imperatorum dos prima* (*Aurelian* 44.1). More specifically, Suetonius observes that Domitian, a clement emperor who later became cruel, would preface capital sentences with talk about clemency (*Domitian* 10.1, 11.2). He sees this as part of Domitian’s devious sadism, whereas the pliability of Claudius and Galba meant their associates could secure pardon for the guilty and punishments for the innocent (*Claudius* 29.1, *Galba* 15.2). When Saturninus was murdered by Probus’ agents, the author, anxious to protect Probus’ reputation, comments that it was *invito Probo* (*Quadriga tyrannorum* 11.3). The author of the *HA*’s fervent support for imperial pardon and mercy emerges from his observation that Aurelian followed the precepts of Apollonius of Tyana in sparing the Antiochenes (*Aurelian* 24.2-25.1). Pertinent comments attributed to participants include Sulla foretelling that sparing Caesar will be the ruin of the Optimates (*Divus Julius* 1.3), Augustus regretting his inflexibility over the proscriptions so
that he pardoned and rewarded a freedman’s loyalty to his proscribed patron (Augustus 27.2; cf. 51.1), and Saturninus’ troops rejecting Probus’ offer of pardon to Saturninus, believing it to be a ruse.¹⁸

Turning to revenge, the keywords used (Suetonius’ occurrences given first) were vindicare (5-21), vindex, excluding references to Julius Vindex (0-1), vindicta, not in the sense of rod (0-9), ultor, excluding references to Mars Ultor (0-2), ultio (10-0), ulcisci (5-5). Total for Suetonius: twenty; total for the Historia Augusta: thirty eight. In Suetonius, seekers of revenge are mainly emperors (10 times), plus Caesar, Germanicus and Otho’s troops. In the Historia Augusta, emperors are also the largest group of seekers, with two other rulers, plus a wife and victorious troops also figuring.¹⁹ Those on whom revenge is taken are, inevitably, more disparate. Reflecting the often deadly rivalry between emperors and their elite subjects, six times in Suetonius emperors are the target of revenge and six times (alleged) conspirators and assassins, with senators, Piso, pirates and foreign rebels also featuring.²⁰ In the Historia Augusta, only three times are emperors the targets. The emphasis is more on revenge being

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¹⁸ Quadriga tyrannorum 11.2. Cf. Marcus being wary of a request for a pardon from Danubian tribes, thinking it was a ruse (Marcus Aurelius 14.4). Septimius Severus frequently said he would have pardoned Pescennius Niger if he had surrendered (Pescennius Niger 4.5). The Historia Augusta author then makes it very clear Septimius was not the forgiving kind.

¹⁹ Since persons without honour such as slaves were not supposed to restore honour via revenge, one would not expect them to figure as seekers for themselves. Suetonius mentions a slave of Aemilius Paulus seeking vengeance from Augustus, but on behalf of his master’s proscribed father (Augustus 16.3). Agrippa Postumus’ slave, Clemens, unsuccessfully sought vengeance from Tiberius for his master’s death (Tiberius 25.1.).

²⁰ If Suetonius’ coverage of the Republic was not largely confined to Julius and the young Augustus, and therefore coloured to some extent by Julius’ clemency, the intensity of feuds in the late Republic, where revenge was a common means of self-glorification, might be more prominent. It is Tacitus rather than Suetonius who brings out the persistence of intra-senatorial feuding in the early Principate. See D. Epstein, Personal Enmity in Roman Politics 218-43 BC (London, 1987).
sought from above, with the targets being usurpers, rivals and rebels (6 times), assassins (4), foreigners (4), troops (2), senators (2), plus slaves, Tarquin the Proud, a husband, a man, and ‘many’.

The pretexts for revenge, as may be surmised from the above, include killing, plotting, rebelling but also the defeat of one’s leader or commander and Otho losing his wife to Nero and being banished to Lusitania (Otho 4.1). Nero wrote to the senate urging it in ultionem for the insulting edicts Vindex had issued (Nero 41.1). The Historia Augusta likewise records revenge sought for murder, rebellion, mutiny and conspiracy (8 examples, including Caracalla killing many persons quasi seditionem vindicans, Caracalla 4.7). Injuries may fester for years before the sufferer is in a position to exact revenge. Septimius Severus as emperor curtailed the rights of the Athenians at whose hands he had once suffered unspecified injuries.21 Slaveowners under Commodus who were falsely accused had to wait till the reign of Pertinax before the new emperor had the culprits crucified (Pertinax 7.10). On the other hand, the wrestling opponent who grabbed Claudius Gothicus’ genitals experienced immediate vindicta when Claudius knocked his teeth out (Claudius Gothicus 13.7), instinctive retaliation rather than planned revenge. Nor did the defeated Goths, who rallied to kill 2000 Roman troops, enjoy their success for long. Arrested and sent to Rome in chains for ludi publici, not only victoria but vindicta was exacted from them (Claudius Gothicus 11.8).

On the issue of how revenge was sought, about half the time in Suetonius and the Historia Augusta there is no clear distinction between the seeking and the achieving of revenge. Revenge often takes careful planning and well-timed execution in order to maximise the advantage of the seeker and the disadvantage of the target. This is not something to which our authors give much prominence, nor to a means common in Tacitus, legal proceedings. The prosecution of Cn. Piso by Germanicus’ associates is a rare example. Execution, murder and warfare are given as both the means and the end result. There may be mention of a force being

21 Septimius Severus 3.7. Cf. Clodius Albinus 9.5, where Severus first spares and then later kills the sons of Clodius Albinus.
gathered first (*Divus Julius* 74.1, *Otho* 4.1) or a letter being sent or circulated (*Nero* 41.1, *Vespasian* 6.4). The praetorians *pertinacissime* demanded the execution of Domitian’s killers (*Domitian* 23.1). Maximinus sought, unsuccessfully, to avenge himself upon his opponents by marching on Rome (*Maximinus* 17.7). In a somewhat bizarre episode, Gallienus put a man in a cage for a while as a means of taking revenge upon him on behalf of the man’s wife. Her husband had sold to her glass instead of real jewels (*Gallieni* 12.5).

Generalising authorial comments in revenge references are that Caesar was *lenissimus* in avenging wrongs (*Divus Julius* 74.1), that Claudius liked to give guard tribunes who were exacting *ultio* a line of Homer as the watchword (*Claudius Gothicus* 42.1), and that Aurelian’s vengeance upon conspirators and rebels was excessively bloodthirsty (*Aurelius* 21.5). More specific authorial comments are that Otho’s hopes of revenge upon Nero were encouraged by an astrologer who foresaw his emperorship (*Otho* 4.1), that Gallienus’ treatment of the cheating husband was an example of Gallienus’ *ingenium*, and that Papinian’s wish that his successor as praetorian prefect take vengeance upon Caracalla for his death was granted (*Caracalla* 8.8). Observations attributed to participants include Elagabalus thinking he had achieved great glory by executing the killers of Caracalla (*Opellius Macrinus* 15.2) and Alexander Severus saying that if troops killed him there would be no shortage of avengers (*Alexander Severus* 54.2). An issue for any emperor who succeeded an assassinated predecessor was what to do with the assassins. Regicide was a dangerous example to encourage or to appear to condone by taking no action. Avenging a predecessor was a useful claim for a successor anxious to assert legitimacy. 22 On the other hand, Didius Julianus’ assurance that he would not exact vengeance upon the praetorians for killing Pertinax was one of the factors that got him proclaimed emperor (*Didius Julianus* 2.6).

Among the references to pardon and revenge there are a number where it is explicitly stated that pardon or revenge was not sought or gained. Given the relationship between these two behaviours, a negative in one

means a positive in the other, that is, pardon not gained often means that revenge/punishment was exacted. Septimius, we are told, refused to pardon Aemilius and later killed him (Septimius 8.15). A participant’s claim to have shown clemency may be refuted by the author, as the Historia Augusta does when Septimius claims just this in the senate concerning Albinus, his family and supporters. The author describes him as cruelissimus and lists many people he killed. No pardon was available for anyone who spoke dishonestly in the senate under Alexander Severus. Instead, offenders were stripped of their rank sine ullius indulgentiae proposito (Alexander Severus 19.2). Likewise, this emperor refused any pardons to military tribunes against whom soldiers brought cases. He punished them in proportion to their offence. Such justice, if authentic, could not have endeared him to military officers. Tiberius refused to relent (neque ... veniam dedit) in the face of Augustus’ and Livia’s pleas for him not to retire to Rhodes, a use of venia that indicates he was offended by their pleading (Tiberius 10.2). Gladiators, being under the impression that Claudius was pardoning them and refusing to fight, had to be convinced by threats and promises that combat was unavoidable (Claudius 21.6). If Agrippina thought her conduct would remain impunita, her husband Claudius was thinking otherwise (Claudius 43). The youthful Nero proclaimed his wish to be liberalis and clemens, like Augustus, and discovered the limits of clemency when he had to sign a death warrant (Nero 10.1).

Turning to failed or unexacted revenge, Gallienus was deplored for his failure to avenge his father (Gallieni 9.2). It took the murder of Odoenathus to galvanise him into a seram nimis vindictam (Gallieni 13.4). Marcus’ reluctance to pursue the associates of Avidius has already been noted. Suetonius has an exemplary story of Titus refusing to take vengeance even when he had good reason to, being content to warn off aspirants to the throne, swearing he would rather be killed than kill, and

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going out of his way to show his forgiveness and trust (Titus 9.1-2). Similarly, Caesar preferred to suppress rather than punish (vindicare) plots (Divus Julius 75.4).

A number of issues are raised by these references containing a pardon or revenge keyword, and some conclusions may be drawn. The wide variety of senses in which the terms can be used make it difficult at times for readers to infer the right nuance but may also indicate a certain vagueness on the part of the authors. Like Tacitus and Ammianus, but unlike Seneca, our authors do not distinguish venia from clementia.\(^24\) It is easier to forgive persons when they are of similar status as oneself. The status of participants in any episode, therefore, helps determine the significance of what does or does not occur. The emperor’s bestowal of pardon or exaction of revenge/punishment has a quite different significance from such behaviour enacted by lesser mortals. Clement or vindictive, his power was underlined.\(^25\) The use of clementia was an effective public relations tool, although it did not prevent Caesar’s assassination, and the venia granted to Ballista (by Gallienus, it seems) did not prevent him making a bid for the purple (Triginta tyranni 18.1). The contrasting behaviour Julius Caesar and Septimius Severus as victors in civil war is marked. There is a sensitivity to injury and vindictive savagery about Septimius that make Caesar, Augustus and Vespasian seem models of magnanimity and non-tyrannical exercise of restraint. Vengefully forcing the senate to deify Commodus was an affront that even Caesar at his most tactless would probably not have inflicted.

What were the reasons for not seeking pardon or revenge? Was it fear or weakness, or magnanimity or perception of some advantage that favoured such a course, such as storing up social credit? The idea of

\(^{24}\) I am treating pardon and revenge in Tacitus and Ammianus in a separate study.

\(^{25}\) Cf. P. Plass, The Game of Death in Rome (Wisconsin, 1995), 92, 116, 125 (clemency as a form of ‘suspended coercion’), 163. Bestowing clemency can be a way of maintaining divine stature. Pardon may increase ‘transgressor distress’ more than retribution does, although the latter also makes the repair of a relationship more difficult.
PARDON AND REVENGE IN SUETONIUS

pardon as a form of revenge is more likely to occur in a society that has evolved a civic code that seeks to regulate the settlement of injuries through litigation and arbitration rather than one where affronted honour expects payment in blood and where the exaction of revenge should be as public as possible. One cannot expect a willingness to have recourse to law to operate in every area or level of a society. If reliance on the law to secure justice and civic rights is a cultural advance, greater reliance on executive clemency and greater susceptibility to arbitrary authority to secure peace and order, such as occurred in post-Republican Rome, is, at least from the standpoint of the elite, a regression. Executive clemency and merciful modification of harsh laws or customs, welcome though perhaps humiliating to the recipient, could be perceived as unwise and unjust, harmful to society’s standards, condoning a wrong and leaving the vengeful feelings of injured third parties unassuaged. There is also the danger that subordinate officials or senators can be harsh and rely on imperial clemency to soften any injustices they commit. The response of Domitian was to affect horror at the cruelty of the senate in imposing death penalties. Deleterious effects of clemency were less likely if the emperor was the injured party with something to forgive, although even he ran the risk of being despised for weakness. If the agents ordered to set up or carry out a scheme of vengeance felt unhappy about their commissions, we never hear of it. If anyone important is executed under clement rulers such as Vespasian, Marcus or Probus, it was, we are assured, against the ruler’s wishes.

A major issue involved in the revenge exacted by power-wielders and office-holders is that of private versus public revenge, particularly when emperors became identified with the state and its maiestas, and can then appeal to Cicero’s dictum that clementia must give way to severitas when the interests of the state are at stake (De Officiis 1.88). State-sponsored punishment is not only a way of dealing with criminals and satisfying needs for revenge, but is ‘an expression of state power, a statement of collective morality, a vehicle for emotional expression, an embodiment of

current sensibilities'.\textsuperscript{27} The delayed vengeance Septimius exacted from the Athenians is a clear example of the abuse of power, and the \textit{Historia Augusta} implies that the punishment Gallienus inflicted on the Byzantines was driven by vindictiveness (Gallieni 7.2). In a fictitious letter sent by Marcus to the senate concerning Avidius' revolt, he is made to observe, perhaps in character but certainly in line with the biographer's thinking, that a emperor's \textit{vindicita} for his own \textit{dolor} is not pleasing. Not only that, but the more violent (\textit{acrior}) such vengeance then seems (Avidius Cassius 12.5). An emperor must be more forgiving than lesser mortals. While the public/private conflict is detectable in Suetonius, it is not so explicitly commented upon by an author who often fails to distinguish public policy and private behaviour.

In conclusion: references to pardon and revenge in Suetonius and the \textit{Historia Augusta} do not, by themselves, suggest an honour-obsessed society or one reliant on non-judicial means to settle conflict in imperial Rome. But enthusiasm for \textit{clementia}, especially by the \textit{Historia Augusta}, reflects the embeddedness of an autocracy that is always potentially \textit{supra legem}, and the lack of confidence subjects could have in the law to always protect their welfare. Emperors could revive the culture of cruelty, revenge and self-interest of tribal societies that Rome had, to some extent, emerged from with its legal institutions. Moreover, the \textit{Historia Augusta} in particular covers a period of semi-anarchy in the third century when applying harsh, even unjust, measures to preserve some degree of order often seemed necessary. The public relations value of clemency and, in some cases, genuine humanitarianism, offsets the greater difficulty of forgiving persons of different status to oneself, inequality of status between participants being common in emperor-centred works.

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\textsuperscript{27} D. Garland, \textit{Punishment and Modern Society} (Chicago, 1990), 287.
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