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SENECA'S *AENEID*: A STOIC READING OF VIRGIL?

ABSTRACT

This paper offers a new perspective on a well-known topic: Seneca's quotations from the Aeneid *in his* Moral Epistles*. It takes as a starting point the commonly held view that Seneca uses Virgil, sometimes altering the text, sometimes decontextualizing it, to support his Stoic ideas, but without implying that this was originally in Virgil's mind. An analysis of both the content and the form of the quotations shows that Seneca uses them not only to convey Stoic ideas but also to provide a narrative. Regarding the content, Seneca avoids descriptive passages, preferring instead passages focussed on a few key concepts: virtue and fighting, god and fate, death. These are at the same time the main themes of the epic poem and those of the* Moral Epistles*. The distribution of the themes throughout the collection and the contextualization of the quoted Virgilian lines reveal a narrative behind Seneca's choices, which in the beginning aims at improving one's virtue and then proceeds, toward the end, to an acceptance of death. As the author of his* Epistles*, Seneca uses the quotations from the* Aeneid *to describe his coming to terms with death. This is further stressed by the frequency of dialogic exchanges among the quoted lines: given the overlap between the fictive dialogue of the letter (author/reader) and that of the quoted lines, there is an identification of the two epistolary characters with the epic ones, and this contributes to Seneca's self-portrayal as a master of philosophy and as an old man facing his approaching end.*

Keywords: Seneca the Younger; *Moral Epistles*; Virgil; *Aeneid*; poetic quotations; self-fashioning

'Quotations in my work are like wayside robbers who leap out, armed, and relieve the idle stroller of his convictions.' (W. Benjamin, *One-Way Street*)

1. INTRODUCTION

It is well known that the Stoics liked to enrich and support their reasoning with poetic quotations, and also that they offered several examples of allegorical readings of Homer and the tragic poets. Hence the famous statement about Chrysippus' *Medea*—namely, that he included so many quotations from that tragedy of Euripides that it seemed like he himself had written it (Diog. Laert. 7.180).[1]

[1] Cf. C. Gill, 'Did Chrysippus understand Medea?', *Phronesis* 28 (1983), 136–49; J.M. Dillon, 'Medea among the philosophers', in J.J. Clauss and S. Iles Johnston (edd.), *Medea. Essays on Medea in Myth, Literature, Philosophy, and Art* (Princeton, 1997), 211–18; S. Lombardi, 'Crisippo e le citazioni poetiche. Il caso della *Medea*', *Acme* 2 (2017), 67–83. The first allegorical reader of Homer was apparently Theagenes of Rhegium (sixth century B.C.E.). On Chrysippus' poetic citations, cf. T. Riedl, *Argument und Dichtung. Dichterzitate bei Chrysipp von Soloi* (Baden-Baden, 2023).

Assessed against this background, Seneca's quotations from poets are not in any way unusual. Still, unlike the early masters of his philosophical school, he never resorts to etymology and only rarely does he resort to linguistic analysis; he focusses, rather, on another mode of interpretation dear to the Stoics—namely, metaphoric or allegorical reading. It is remarkable that he focusses on Virgil (that is, on Roman epic) instead of tragedy; Cicero, by contrast, quotes Ennius' *Annals* but also Accius and Republican tragedy.[2] Seneca does this, first, because Virgil is the Latin equivalent of Homer[3] who was also used by the Stoics to support their theories and, second, because the only Roman theatre in existence was archaic works, which were not appreciated in Seneca's time,[4] and Augustan tragedies, which Seneca does not take into account. For instance, he explicitly dislikes Ovid, despite quoting several lines from the *Metamorphoses* and taking him as a model for his own theatrical plays.[5] Seneca replaces tragedy with mime, a minor genre to which he attributes a high moral function.[6] By these choices he not only Romanizes poetic authorities[7] but also passes literary and aesthetic judgements, both on stylistic appropriateness and on the moral implications of the authors and their works.

In this article, I would like to focus on Seneca's favourite author by far, Virgil, *maximus uates* according to a famous passage in *Dial.* 10.9.2, and to discuss his treatment of the *Aeneid* in the *Moral Epistles*, the work in which most of his *Aeneid* quotations are gathered.[8] I wish to consider both the original context—Seneca's favourite books and episodes of the *Aeneid*—and Seneca's own context, that is, the Virgilian material's relationship to the structure and content of Seneca's letters. My focus will be on Seneca's personal choice of Virgilian passages and on his interpretation of the epic poem. And I will reveal why I have ended my subtitle with a question mark: I do not believe that Seneca's reading is *sic et simpliciter* Stoic. Scholars have recognized this, even if with some differences of interpretation, at least since Setaioli's seminal paper of 1965,[9] which stresses how Virgil might be used for different purposes, and that Seneca is clearly aware that he is resemanticizing the quoted lines. Even when Seneca uses Virgil's lines to support a Stoic view, this does not imply that he considers those lines to be Stoic. What I would like to add to this and to several other studies on the topic is a new

[2] D. Dueck, 'Poetic quotations in Latin prose works of philosophy', *Hermes* 137 (2009), 315.

[3] Cf. *Dial.* 11.8.2. On Homer in Seneca, G. Mazzoli, *Seneca e la poesia* (Milan, 1970), 160–5; A. Setaioli, *Seneca e i Greci. Citazioni e traduzioni nelle opere filosofiche* (Bologna, 1980), 50–5; Dueck (n. 2), 316–17.

[4] Mazzoli (n. 3), 194–8 (cf. 171–5 on Greek tragedies).

[5] A well-studied topic about which see, at least, C. Trinacty, *Senecan Tragedy and the Reception of Augustan Poetry* (Oxford, 2014).

[6] F. Giancotti, 'Le *sententiae* di Publilio Siro e Seneca', in P. Grimal (ed.), *La langue latine, langue de la philosophie* (Paris, 1992), 9–38. Other poets, such as Lucretius and Horace, are quoted on a few occasions; cf. Dueck (n. 2), 315. U. Tischer, '*Nostra faciamus*. Quoting in Horace and Seneca', in M. Stöckinger, K. Winter and A.T. Zanker (edd.), *Horace and Seneca. Interactions, Intertexts, Interpretations* (Berlin and Boston, 2017), 289–313 juxtaposes Seneca's with Horace's ways of quoting poetry.

[7] Cicero very often translates from Greek, while in Seneca this happens only rarely: Dueck (n. 2), 318–19.

[8] Mazzoli (n. 3), 232.

[9] A. Setaioli, 'Esegesi virgiliana in Seneca', *SIFC* 37 (1965), 154–6; Mazzoli (n. 3), 215–32. A nuanced position is expressed by E.E. Batinski, 'Virgilian citations in Seneca's prose works' (Diss., Ann Arbor, 1983), 87–170. Cf. also A.L. Motto and J.R. Clark, 'Philosophy and poetry: Seneca and Virgil', *CO* 56 (1978), 3–5; J.–M. André, 'La presence de Virgile chez Sénèque: zones d'ombre et de lumière', *Helmantica* 33 (1982), 219–33; R.J. Gambla, 'Verse quotation in the *Epistulae morales* of Seneca' (Diss., Evanston, IL, 1986), 78–118 on Virgil; C. Auvray, 'La citation virgilienne dans les *Lettres à Lucilius* de Sénèque: des *praecepta* aux *decreta* du Stoïcisme', in G. Freyburgen (ed.), *De Virgile à Jacob Balde. Hommage à Mme Andrée Thill* (Mulhouse, 1987), 29–34; Dueck (n. 2), 333–4.

perspective on the *Moral Epistles*. My aim will not be to distinguish between different kinds of interpretation of the quoted lines, or to determine whether Seneca had the whole text or only a portion at his disposal, which others have already discussed, but rather to focus on Seneca's choices, both from a formal and from a content-related point of view, in order to attempt a general interpretation of the narrative they represent when taken as a whole. For the content I will list the quotation, outlining and exemplifying the key themes and their development; as for the form, I will stress the correspondences between epic and epistolary characters suggested by direct speeches in the quotations.

2. THE QUOTATIONS

Here is a detailed table of the quotations, reporting the references of Seneca's letters, the quoted Virgilian lines (with cf. if altered from the tradition; original text in square brackets), the general subject of the passage, and the speaking character(s), in case there are any. In the first column, numbers in bold type correspond to Seneca's letters that will be dealt with at length in this article; in the second column, words in bold, such as imperatives or vocatives, are those which highlight the dialogic form of the quoted passage (cf. below, section 6).

Sen. *Ep.*	Verg. *Aen.*	Subject[10]	Characters
12.9 = *Dial.* 7.19.1 = *Ben.* 5.17.5	4.653 **uixi** et quem dederat cursum fortuna peregi	fate/god	Dido
18.12 = 31.11	8.364–5 **aude**, hospes, contemnere opes et te quoque dignum | **finge** deo	fate/god	Evander/ Aeneas
21.5	9.446–9 fortunati ambo! si quid **mea carmina** possunt, | nulla dies unquam memori uos eximet aeuo, | dum domus Aeneae Capitoli immobile saxum | accolet imperiumque pater Romanus habebit	authorship	Virgil
28.1 = 70.2	Cf. 3.72 terraeque urbesque recedant [recedunt]	travelling/ virtue	Aeneas
28.3	6.78–9 bacchatur uates, magnum si pectore possit | excussisse deum	fate/god	–
31.11 = 18.12 (shortened)	8.364–5 et te quoque dignum | **finge** deo	fate/god	Evander/ Aeneas
37.3	2.494 fit uia <ui>	fighting/ virtue	Aeneas

[10] When the subject is in brackets, this means that Seneca completely decontextualizes the quotation (see below, page 653).

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41.2	8.352 (quis deus incertum est) habitat deus	fate/god	Evander
48.11 = 73.15	9.641 sic itur ad astra	virtue/ fighting	Apollo/ Iulus
49.7	8.385–6 **aspice** qui coeant populi, quae moenia clusis | ferrum acuant portis	virtue/ fighting	Venus/ Vulcan
53.3	6.3 obuertunt pelago proras 3.277 ancora de prora iacitur	travelling/ virtue	– Aeneas
56.12	2.726–9 et **me**, quem dudum non ulla iniecta mouebant | tela, neque aduerso glomerati ex agmine Grai, | nunc omnes terrent aurae, sonus excitat omnis | suspensum et pariter comitique onerique timentem	virtue/ fighting	Aeneas
58.3	12.708–9 ingentis, genitos diuersis partibus orbis, | inter se coiisse uiros et cernere ferro 11.467 cetera, qua iusso, **mecum** manus inferat arma	(virtue/ fighting)	– (Turnus)
59.3	6.278–9 et mala mentis | gaudia	vice/virtue	–
59.17	6.513–14 namque ut supremam falsa inter gaudia noctem | egerimus nosti	vice/virtue	Deiphobus/ Aeneas
64.4	4.158–9 spumantemque dari pecora inter inertia uotis | optat aprum aut fuluum descendere monte leonem	virtue/ fighting	(Ascanius)
66.2	5.344 gratior et pulchro ueniens e corpore uirtus	virtue/ fighting	–
67.8	1.94–6 **o** terque quaterque beati | quis ante ora patrum Troiae sub moenibus altis | contigit oppetere	death	Aeneas
70.2	3.72 = 28.1 terraeque urbesque recedunt Cf. 3.291	travelling/ virtue	Aeneas
73.15 = 48.11	9.641 itur ad astra	virtue/ fighting	Apollo/ Iulus
76.33	6.103–5 non ulla laborum, | **o** uirgo, noua mi facies inopinaue surgit; | omnia **praecepi** atque animo mecum ipse **peregi**	virtue/ fighting	Aeneas/ Sibyl

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77.12	6.376 **desine** fata deum flecti sperare precando	fate/god	Sibyl/ Palinurus
78.15	1.203 forsan et haec olim meminisse iuuabit	virtue/ fighting	Aeneas
82.7	6.261 nunc animis opus, **Aenea**, nunc pectore firmo	virtue/ fighting	Sibylla/ Aeneas
82.16	6.400–1 + 8.296–7 ingens ianitor Orci | ossa super recubans antro semesa cruento | aeternum latrans exsangues terrat umbras	death	Sibyl– Salii's chant
82.18	6.95–6 **tu ne cede** malis, sed contra audentior **ito** | quam te fortuna sinet	virtue/ fighting	Sibyl/ Aeneas
84.3	1.432–3 liquentia mella | stipant et dulci distendent nectare cellas	(virtue/ fighting)	–
85.4	7.808–11 illa uel intactae segetis per summa uolaret | gramina nec cursu teneras laesisset aristas, | uel mare per medium fluctu suspensa tumenti | ferret iter, celeres nec tingueret aequore plantas	virtue/ fighting	(Camilla)
87.8	7.277–9 instratos ostro alipedes pictisque tapetis: | aurea pectoribus demissa monilia pendent, | tecti auro fuluum mandunt sub dentibus aurum	vice/virtue	(Latinus/ Aeneas)
89.17	1.342 summa **sequar** fastigia rerum	authorship	Venus/ Aeneas
92.9	3.426–8 prima hominis facies et pulchro pectore uirgo | pube tenus, postrema inmani corpore pistrix | delphinum caudas utero commissa luporum	(virtue/ fighting)	Helenus/ Aeneas
92.30	Cf. 5.363 si cui uirtus animusque in corpore [pectore] praesens	virtue/ fighting	Aeneas
92.34	Cf. 9.485 canibus data praeda marinis [latinis]	death	Euryalus' mother
94.28	10.284 (coupled with a quotation from Publilius Syrus) audentis fortuna iuuat	virtue/ fighting	Turnus

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95.33	Cf. 8.442 (6.261) nunc manibus rapidis opus est [omni], nunc arte magistra	virtue/ fighting	Volcan/ workers
98.4	Cf. 2.428 dis aliter uisum est	fate/god	Aeneas
101.13	12.646 usque adeone mori miserum est?	death	Turnus
102.30	4.3–4 multa uiri uirtus animo multusque recursat | gentis honos	(death)	(Dido)
104.10	3.282–3 euasisse tot urbes | Argolicas mediosque fugam tenuisse per hostis	travelling/ virtue	–
104.24	6.277 (redoubled) terribiles uisu formae, Letumque Labosque	death	–
104.31	1.458 Atriden Priamumque et saeuom ambobus Achillen	virtue/ fighting	(Aeneas)
107.3 = 108.29	6.274–5 Luctus et ultrices posuere cubilia Curae | pallentesque habitant morbi tristisque Senectus	death	–
108.29 = 107.3	6.275 pallentesque habitant morbi tristisque Senectus	death	–
113.25	1.1 arma uirumque cano	(virtue/ fighting)	Virgil
115.5	1.327–8 and 330 **o** quam **te** memorem, uirgo? namque haut tibi uultus | mortalis nec uox hominem sonat … | sis felix nostrumque leues quaecumque laborem	fate/god (virtue)	Aeneas/ Venus

There are forty-five quotations,[11] forty-eight if we count separately the passages in which Seneca groups different lines together; they are generally placed close to the beginning or to the end of a letter. The quotations are also short, of one to five (only one case) lines, and quite uniformly spread over the 124 letters, with the exception of the first three books (*Epistles* 1–29), where there is a strong presence of sentences attributed to Epicurus, and of the last book.

Regarding the first books, Seneca's choice may be stylistic—gathering too many references is inappropriate—but there may also be another reason:[12] Epicureans themselves did not quote a lot, so Seneca, in this section of his work, decides to do the

[11] I. Lana, 'Le *Lettere a Lucilio* nella letteratura epistolare', in P. Grimal (ed.), *Sénèque et la prose latine* (Genève, 1991), 265.

[12] According to André (n. 9), 230, the reason might be reluctance to offer poetic support for the competitive philosophical school.

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same, thus offering examples not only of Epicurean moral precepts but also of their way of conveying them. As for the last section of the collection, we find a few quotations from the *Georgics* there. Quotations from that work, and certainly from the *Eclogues*, are fewer than those from the *Aeneid* but tend toward the longer side of the range, probably because Seneca assumed the readers' knowledge of the *Aeneid* but not of the other Virgilian poems.[13]

Seneca demonstrates an awareness of the original context, since he often echoes it in what precedes and what follows the quotation itself,[14] yet in most cases he rephrases, alters or even denies and contradicts the content of the lines, which is then used to advance his own agenda. So, even though Seneca considers Virgil to be the greatest Roman poet, he does not treat him as a philosophical authority but rather as a rhetorical tool. Sometimes his quotations support the Stoic view, sometimes they are offered as an example of the wrong way of thinking.[15] Virgil's fame among Latin readers has a didactic implication: it is a means of conveying philosophical concepts and of illustrating them.

If we consider Seneca's choices regarding the *Aeneid*, we notice a preference for Books 6 (twelve quotations), 1 (seven quotations), 3 and 8 (five quotations each), and a lack of interest in the last three books (one or two quotations each). In four cases, the same lines are quoted twice; a few times (four) the lines are contaminated or altered, but only in order to better fit the new context, not to manipulate the general meaning.[16] In several letters there is more than one quotation, even from other Virgilian poems (for example in *Epistles* 73 and 108). Simply from the list of quotations we may infer a preference for the first half of the *Aeneid*, the so-called 'Odyssean' one, but, if we make a sort of cento of the quoted lines and identify the key concepts, a different picture emerges.

Reading the quotations one by one, we see a lack of detailed passages. For instance, there are no quotations referring to places, such as the Campanian shore[17] and Sicily, which we find both in the *Aeneid* and in Seneca's letters; neither do we find detailed episodes or explicit references to specific characters, with only one exception (the quotation of Aeneas' name in *Epistle* 82). This shows Seneca's lack of interest in the concrete details of Virgil's poem and his focus on its ideal purpose.

Indeed, Seneca shows a preference for only a few themes: gods, with their related concepts of fate and fortune (eight occurrences); death (seven occurrences); and virtue, linked with force and fighting (fifteen occurrences).[18] These themes, which are intertwined with each other, show that the 'Iliadic' subjects of the *Aeneid* are not

[13] In Seneca's *Moral Epistles* we find eleven quotations from the *Georgics*, only one from the *Eclogues* (in *Ep.* 73.10, on which see F.R. Berno, 'La concessione dell'*otium.* Nerone e Seneca nella lettera 73', *Scienze dell'antichità* 30 [2024], 217–18). On Senecan quotations from the *Georgics*, see J.M. Bañales Léoz, 'Las *Geórgicas* de Virgilio en las cartas de Séneca', in M. Rodríguez-Pantoja, *Séneca dos mil años después* (Cordoba, 1997), 551–60; B. Pieri, '*Optimi vitae dies*: il *salutare carmen* di Virgilio e un caso di "ironia intertestuale" nella *Phaedra* senecana', in M.M. Bianco and A. Casamento (edd.), Novom aliquid inventum. *Scritti sul teatro antico per Gianna Petrone* (Palermo, 2018), 255–8.

[14] Mazzoli (n. 3), 229; see below, sections 3–5.

[15] Setaioli (n. 9), especially 138–9; Batinski (n. 9), 121–3 and 189.

[16] Batinski (n. 9), 41–86. A partial exception is letter 92.34, where *marinis* replaces Virgil's *latinis* (see the table at page 650 above). In this case, there might be an allusion to the previous Virgilian quotation about Scylla (92.9), which in its turn may anticipate the monstrosity of Maecenas' effeminate appearance, thinking and poetry. I am grateful to Emily Gowers for this suggestion.

[17] André (n. 9), 225–6.

[18] Cf. Batinski (n. 9), 163–4, according to whom the epic passages exemplify a Stoic view of death and fate. Dueck (n. 2), 319–30, considering all of Seneca's poetic quotations, lists ten different topics, among which are the three mentioned above.

neglected at all.[19] To these we may add references to travelling (four) and vice (three): indeed, travelling is an alternative metaphor for fighting adversities, and vices, of course, represent the main opponent to virtue. Two further passages are devoted to authorship.

Fighting, fate, death: these themes show that Seneca is using the epic poem for its basic purpose, which is to represent a heroic struggle imposed by fate, except that Seneca applies it to the interior life of a person. We may say that, even if Seneca's reading often goes in a different direction from that implied in the original context, in most cases the basic subject remains the same.

To my knowledge, there are only five cases in which Seneca inserts a Virgilian line in a completely different context: aside from the instances where Seneca has the lines as part of a discussion about language, which include the quotation of the opening line of the *Aeneid* (*Ep.* 113.25), the most striking such instance is in *Epistle* 102, where Virgil's description of Dido's loving thoughts for Aeneas is applied to someone considering his dying soul (102.30, quoting *Aen.* 4.3–4). The quotation enriches the discussion about the probable mortality of the soul with a touch of sweetness and melancholy, depicting death as the end of a love story between body and soul.

In the large majority of cases, Seneca shifts from actual battles to moral ones; sometimes he might read a line in a surprising way, but he does not alter its context. I will present the three main groups of themes, and offer a case study for each one (sections 3–5); finally, after taking into account the dialogic form of several quotations (section 6), I will consider the development of the themes themselves, reading the quotations as a continuum (section 7).

3. MAIN THEMES 1: GODS, FATE AND FORTUNE

Gods are naturally linked with fate in Stoic philosophy, and also in epic poetry, especially in Virgil's *Aeneid*. There are many passages that would fit a Stoic discussion on the acceptance of fate. Seneca avoids easy choices[20] and picks a few subtler ones. An example is Dido's famous last words, *uixi et quem dederat cursum fortuna peregi* (*Aen.* 4.653), which constitute the first quotation of the *Aeneid* in the *Moral Epistles* (12.9). This passage has already been thoroughly studied;[21] I would like to stress that here the Punic queen is paradoxically quoted as a positive example of the acceptance of fate.

As a case study for this group of themes, I would rather propose *Ep.* 77.12, where we find *Aen.* 6.376:[22]

> in hoc punctum **coniectus** es, quod ut extendes, quousuqe extendas? quid fles? quid optas? perdis operam.
>
> desine fata deum flecti sperare precando. [*Aen*. 6.376]
>
> rata et fixa sunt et magna atque aeterna necessitate ducuntur: eo ibis quo omnia eunt.

[19] It may be of interest that Seneca quotes only the *Iliad* and never the *Odyssey*, despite referring to Odysseus several times: Dueck (n. 2), 316.

[20] E.g. *Aen.* 1.382 *matre dea monstrante uiam data fata secutus*; 2.34 *siue dolo seu iam Troiae sic fata ferebant*; 12.676 *iam iam fata, soror, superant, absiste morari*.

[21] For recent studies, see W.R. Mann, 'Learning how to die: Seneca's use of *Aeneid* 6.653 in *EM* 12.9', in K. Volk and G. Williams (edd.), *Seeing Seneca Whole. Perspectives on Politics, Philosophy, and Poetry* (Berlin and Boston, 2006), 103–22; F.R. Berno, 'Il saggio destino di Didone. *Aen.* IV 653 in Seneca (*vit. b.* 19, 1; *benef.* 5, 17, 5; *ep.* 12, 9)', *Maia* 66 (2014), 123–36.

[22] Mazzoli (n. 3), 48.

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You have been cast into this moment of time; you might extend it, but for how long? Why are you crying? What is it you want? You're wasting your efforts.
Stop hoping that your prayers will ever change what gods ordain.
Your fate is fixed, determined by a vast, eternal necessity. You will go where all things go.[23]

Line 376, with the Virgilian expression *fata deum*, summons several Stoic ideas, and so it matches Seneca's reasoning: the presence of an inescapable fate, the inopportunity of wishful prayers, the impossibility of changing one's destiny. The words are spoken by the Sibyl, who is addressing Palinurus' shadow in order to take away his hope for a proper burial. The prophetess consoles him only with the prospect of his name being given to the promontory around which he died. Seneca's context is different: while in Virgil the words refer to an individual destiny, Seneca applies them to the death common to all humanity; the 'you' is indeed a generic addressee. The introductory image is a powerful, we may say Heideggerian, metaphor—namely, that of existence being 'thrown' (*coniectus*) into the present, which in turn is only a moment. What follows the Virgilian line is a consolatory commonplace, that of death as a universal destiny according to natural law. Seneca adopts some stylistic features of the Virgilian passage from which the line is taken, such as the use of the second-person singular and of direct questions, but he is also aware of the content, because what follows is a consolatory argument, like that of the Sibyl in Virgil (indeed, she says *sed cape dicta memor, duri* ***solacia*** *casus*, *Aen.* 6.377). Moreover, the purpose of *Epistle* 77 is to encourage an acceptance of our death whenever and however it comes, without concern for it: and this is what the Sibyl is telling Palinurus.

4. MAIN THEMES 2: VIRTUE, STRENGTH AND FIGHTING

Virtue as moral strength is always connected in Seneca with images of fighting. This lends itself to a metaphorical reading of epic lines, since epic is full of fighting imagery. It strikes me that the passages Seneca chooses are focussed on attack rather than defence, and that they are free of gore, which is quite frequent *both* in *Aeneid* Books 10 and 11 *and* in Seneca's account of the battles of virtue.[24] Seneca, who often describes life as a defensive war against the violence of events, prefers to use Virgil in optimistic contexts, where he stresses human potential in winning battles against vice and disgrace. Since he avoids bloody images in the poem, in his selection of passages he also seems to share the aesthetic idea of sobriety and fine elegance associated with Virgil.[25]

[23] Here and below, translations are by M. Graver and A.A. Long (edd.), *L. Annaeus Seneca* Letters on Ethics (Chicago and London, 2015).

[24] Cf. e.g. *Ep.* 24.14, 37.1–2 *eadem honestissimi huius et illius turpissimi auctoramenti uerba sunt: 'uri, uinciri ferroque necari.' ab illis qui manus harenae locant et edunt ac bibunt quae per sanguinem reddant cauetur ut ista uel inuiti patiantur: a te ut uolens libensque patiaris . . . recto tibi inuictoque moriendum est.* On Seneca's obsession for pain and torture, C. Edwards, 'The suffering body: philosophy and pain in Seneca's *Letters*', in J.I. Porter (ed.), *Constructions of the Classical Body* (Ann Arbor, 1999), 253–68; J.-C. Courtil, 'Torture in Seneca's philosophical works: between justification and condemnation', in M.L. Colish and J. Wildberger (edd.), *Seneca philosophus* (Berlin and Boston, 2014), 189–207; J.-C. Courtil, Sapientia contemptrix doloris*: Le corps souffrant dans l'œuvre philosophique de Sénèque* (Bruxelles, 2015), 26–36 and 495–9 for a list of passages on torture; E. Malaspina, 'L'ossessione della tortura in Seneca. Una falla nella resistenza del *sapiens*?', *GIF* 73 (2021), 147–64.

[25] An idea which we find in the *Vita Donati*, probably inspired by Suetonius' life and also by Varius' biography. Cf. G. Brugnoli, 'Vitae vergilianae', in *Enciclopedia virgiliana* V (Rome, 1990), 574; N. Horsfall, *A Companion to the Study of Virgil* (Leiden and Boston, 1995), 7; R.F. Thomas, 'Virgil, life and works of', in *The Virgil Encyclopedia* III (London, 2014), 1344–5.

A few images are focussed on virtue's seductive appearance, which contrasts with ugly physical exteriority. I would like to read one of these contrasting passages, in *Epistle* 66, a long letter about the evaluation of goods which starts with the image of Seneca meeting Claranus, an old and disabled friend, whose spiritual force transcends his physical limits. The image, clearly modelled after Socrates' example in the *Symposium*, stresses the reality of a good hidden under an awful or disturbing appearance (66.2):[26]

errare mihi uisus est qui dixit
gratior et **pulchro** ueniens e **corpore uirtus.** [*Aen*. 5.344]
non enim ullo **honestamento** eget: ipsa magnum sui decus est et **corpus** suum consecrat. aliter certe Claranum nostrum coepi intueri: **formosus** mihi uidetur et tam rectus **corpore** quam est animo.

I think the poet was mistaken when he said:
and virtue, more admired in comely figure.
For virtue needs nothing to ennoble it: it is its own great ornament, and makes sacred the body it inhabits. Certainly I have begun to see our friend Claranus in a new way: he seems quite handsome to me, and as upright in stature as he is in his spirit.

The quotation is from the fifth book, where comeliness is represented by the young and charming Euryalus, who claims a prize in a footrace. The Virgilian context is focussed on physical appearance as worthy of *honor*; Seneca answers by denying the need of a physical *honestamentum*, a derivative from *honor* stressing the exterior appearance of nobleness, and insists on interior *decus*, a synonym of *honor*, in addition to the body (two repetitions of *corpus*, already in Virgil's passage), while *uirtus*, which is the subject of the quoted line, remains implied in the following comment. Seneca also focusses on beauty, with the deliberate choice of *formosus*, an attribute that specifically refers to exterior appearance, instead of *pulcher*, Virgil's word here, which can also have a mental connotation. These lexical choices emphasize the paradoxical nature of Claranus' beauty, which is exclusively interior but is described with a physical exterior attribute, whereas in Virgil *pulcher* highlights the overlap between exterior and interior pleasantness.

Furthermore, the choice of *honestamentum*, a rare, heavy and prosaic word,[27] contrasts with the lightness of the quoted line, probably alluding to the contrast between the pleasant appearance of the young Euryalus and the more disagreeable appearance of the old and disabled Claranus, or to Claranus' remarkable efforts to overcome his physical limitations.

Seneca's comment is anticipated by the sharp introduction to the quotation: *errare mihi uisus est*. Virgil does not deserve anything more than a generic pronoun (*qui*), and this formula often introduces incorrect hypotheses in prose works.[28]

[26] Setaioli (n. 9), 137–8; Gambla (n. 9), 115.

[27] According to the *TLL* 6.3.2895.40–75, it is attested only in prose since the ps.-sallustian *Epistulae ad Caesarem senem de re publica* 2.13.2; cf. Apul. *Apol.* 4; Symm. *Ep.* 1.6.2.

[28] For other examples of this expression, referred to philosophical theories, see *Ep.* 18.1, 57.7, 73.1, 81.17, 95.10. For other passages in which Virgil's sentences are considered inaccurate or wrong, cf. *Ep.* 59.3 (*parum proprie*); 82.16 (*istas fabulas esse*); 86.15 (*non . . . uerissime*, referred to a quotation from the *Georgics*).

5. MAIN THEMES 3: DEATH

Death is referred to in quotations seven times, although one might have expected more, given Seneca's obsession with this topic. Indeed, most quotations about fate are followed by meditations about death, so we may add those references to our consideration. Moreover, it has to be noted that death is never mentioned as a concrete event in the quotations, despite the frequency of Virgil's descriptions of it; Seneca prefers general statements or mythological references, such as the frightening personifications one might find in the underworld. Again, in his choices Seneca echoes Virgilian discretion and reticence. When dealing with death as a concrete event, Seneca prefers a low register and a satirical or diatribe-like tone. Coming from a playwright with a distinctive taste for bloody scenes, this sounds like an aesthetic adaptation to the present context.

We might take as an example *Ep.* 107.3, where Seneca quotes *Aen.* 6.274–5:[29]

praeparetur animus contra omnia: **sciat** se uenisse ubi tonat fulmen; **sciat** se uenisse ubi

> Luctus et ultrices posuere cubilia Curae
> pallentesque habitant Morbi tristisque Senectus. [*Aen*. 6.274–5]

in hoc contubernio **uita degenda est**. effugere ista non potes, **contemnere** potes; contemnes autem si saepe cogitaueris et futura praesumpseris.

Let him prepare himself for all that lie ahead, knowing that he has come to the place where thunder resounds, where

> Wails and avenging Cares have made their beds,
> Where wan Diseases dwell and grim Old Age.

This is the company in which you have to spend your life. You cannot escape those things, but you can rise above them, and you will succeed in doing so if you frequently reflect on and anticipate the future.

Seneca reverses Virgil's underworld setting and places the personifications of evil on earth, where we meet them in real life. In the *Aeneid*, Aeneas is scared (*trepidus*, 6.290) and tries to fight them until he realizes that they are only shadows (6.290–4 *corripit hic subita* ***trepidus*** *formidine ferrum* | *Aeneas strictamque aciem uenientibus offert;* | *et, ni* ***docta comes tenuis sine corpore uitas*** | *admoneat uolitare caua sub imagine formae,* | *inruat et* ***frustra*** *ferro diuerberet umbras*). Seneca, who considers being scared typical of the unlearned ones (*inparatus*, *Ep.* 107.4), does not suggest fighting terrible events, which would be useless, but rather adopting some resilient strategies to avoid fear: despising them, diminishing their appearance, analysing their probability. This attitude resembles that of the learned Sybil (*docta comes*, *Aen.* 6.292), who instructs Aeneas about the evanescent nature of those figures (6.292–3).

It is interesting to note that also in his tragedy *Oedipus*, 591–6, where he imitates those lines,[30] Seneca places the shadows on earth: as in Lucan (6.654–830), it is the underworld that rises to the earth and not a living man who descends, so the deathly atmosphere of hell contaminates the world of living beings.

Life is a living hell, literally, not only in tragedies but also in real life.[31] Seneca concludes his letter by quoting his poetic translation of Cleanthes' hymn to Zeus, a famous exhortation to accept fate (107.11). We can say that in *Epistle* 107, as in a few

[29] Setaioli (n. 9), 153–4; André (n. 9), 225–6.

[30] A.J. Boyle, *Seneca* Oedipus. *Edited with Introduction, Translation, & Commentary* (Oxford, 2014), 250.

[31] Cf. Lucr. 3.978–1023 (where we find only infernal punishments, not personifications of evils); André (n. 9), 226.

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other places, Seneca quotes Virgil for an example of common behaviour, opposed to that of the wise person who is solemnly portrayed in the final sections of the letter. The Virgilian passage must indeed have had some effect on him, because he quotes it again, together with a few other lines from the *Georgics* on the passing of time, in the following letter, 108, where Seneca affirms that philosophers use poetic quotations to ease the understanding and memorization of their precepts (108.9);[32] it is a famous letter, in which he discusses the superiority of the philosophical interpretation over the grammatical and philological interpretations of poetry. The line he had quoted from the *Georgics* in *Dial.* 10.9.2, *fugit inreparabile tempus* (*G.* 3.284),[33] referring to busy men who waste their time, is repeated here (*Ep.* 108.24 and 108.26), with a universal and deathly echo of the lines from the *Aeneid* about the infernal shadows. It is evident that the lines from the epic poem, if compared to those from the didactic one, are used to highlight innate human fears. While in *Epistle* 107 the quotations from Virgil's hell are mitigated by the solemn and peaceful words of Cleanthes' hymn, in *Epistle* 108 we see a reversal: hell arrives at the end, after the philosophical reflection is enriched and inspired by the *Georgics*. If we leave aside the last quotations, aimed at mocking philologists (108.33–4)[34] in accordance with a typical Senecan technique of lightening the mood at the end of a letter, death has the final word, not as a natural phenomenon and universal law, as Seneca tries to show, but as the terrifying event that common men see.

6. TWO EMBEDDED DIALOGUES

We have just seen a few examples of Seneca's use of Virgilian lines: a use that is at the same time free (Seneca declares Virgil wrong or reads him in a peculiar way) and respectful (he indulges his stylistic features and key themes). Now I would like to draw attention to a formal element in the quotations: most of them contain direct speech, which implies an I/you dialectic that coincides with that of the letters and thus involves the reader. Indeed, as everyone knows, the epistolary genre is characterized by an exchange between a first-person and a second-person singular.[35] In quoting direct speech in Virgil, Seneca formally parallels epistolary usage, but also dramatizes the context, in two ways. First, the exhortative tone in Virgil, expressed for example through the imperative mood and explicit allocutions, allows Seneca to dramatize his precepts without appearing rude or inappropriate. Second, there is an overlap between the characters of the dialogue. Attached is a table of the character correspondences.

[32] *salutaribus praeceptis* [*sc. philosophi*] *uersus inseruntur, efficacius eadem illa demissuri in animum imperitorum.* Cf. Setaioli (n. 9), 133–4; Mazzoli (n. 3), 222; Gambla (n. 9), 89–91.

[33] Pieri (n. 13), 257–9. In *Ep.* 108.26, Seneca also quotes Verg. *G.* 3.66–8.

[34] Cic. *Rep.* fr. 7, page 379 Müller = Enn. frr. var. 19–20 V.^{2}; Verg. *G.* 3.260–1; Cic. *Rep.* fr. 6, page 379 Müller = Enn. frr. var. 23–4 V.^{2}.

[35] J.G. Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus, OH, 1982), especially 117–22; Sen. *Ep.* 27.1 *itaque audi tamquam mecum loquar*; Ps.-Demetrius, *On Style* 223–4. Cf. B. Inwood, 'Seneca and self-assertion', in B. Inwood, *Reading Seneca. Stoic Philosophy at Rome* (Oxford, 2005), 346–9; B. Inwood, 'The importance of form in Seneca's philosophical letters', in R. Morello and A.D. Morrison (edd.), *Ancient Letters. Classical and Late Antique Epistolography* (Oxford, 2007), 146–8.

	Ep.	*Aeneid* quotations			
'I'	**Seneca** as the author	**Aeneas** (11 cases)	Evander, the Sybil, Venus, Helenus	Apollo (2 cases)	**Turnus** (3 cases)
'You'	**Lucilius**/the reader	Aeneas' companions, Venus, undetermined (Dido)	**Aeneas** (8 cases)	Ascanius	
General feeling	Friendship and scholarship in philosophy	Weakness, doubt, astonishment	Positive and optimistic exhortations		Enthusiasm, acceptance of death

If the I/you exchange in the *Aeneid* is, for instance, between Evander and Aeneas, as happens in three cases, and those lines are then quoted in a letter, that is, in an I/you exchange between Seneca and the reader, then there is an implicit identification of Seneca with the wise, old Arcadian king on one side, and of the reader with the wandering hero who needs advice on how to know and accept his fate on the other side. In nine cases, we find exhortations to a 'you', who is Aeneas, from Evander, the Sibyl, Venus or Helenus;[36] in one case, quoted twice, the addressee is Ascanius. In eleven cases, Aeneas speaks, as a narrator or when exhorting his companions or when revealing his feelings; in three cases, Turnus speaks. From this list we cannot spot any fixed overlap between characters, but some general trends are clear.

Let us start with Seneca. In some cases, there is an overlap between the author and one of Aeneas' mentors, such as the Sybil, Evander and so on. Their words are comforting and exhortative. This matches the master/pupil relationship which characterizes the author and the reader of the letters.

The cases of overlap between Seneca and Aeneas, apart from some exhortations to fighting, are not heroic; rather, they show the weak or at least human side of the hero: his fear for his family (*Epistle* 56), bafflement in meeting his divine mother (115), being used to harshness (76),[37] complaint for dead friends (98), even a sort of melancholic attitude towards the past (78). Aeneas is a struggling hero, and Seneca, when he identifies with him, quotes the lines that emphasize his efforts.[38] Seneca's Turnus is more heroic: he trusts fortune and despises death. The last quotation of Aeneas' words is in *Epistle* 115, from Aeneas' meeting with Venus (whom Seneca identifies with the wise person's soul), and it expresses astonishment and bewilderment, while two of the three quotations referring to Turnus show him as a fearless warrior, determined to accept his destiny; these two are placed in the last third of the epistolary work (*Epistles* 94 and 98). We may infer that Seneca uses all these quotations to stress his role as a master of philosophy; that he proposes at the same time an overlap not only between himself as author of the letters and Aeneas as a *proficiens*, the Stoic person in progress, but also between himself and Turnus as a loser as well as a self-confident hero. This matches his own self-fashioning; indeed, he presents himself as a master

[36] One time, Deiphobus.

[37] In this case, Seneca explicitly makes reference to a direct speech: *securus audit et dicit: 'non ulla laborum, | o uirgo …'* (*Ep.* 76.33).

[38] In one case (*Epistle* 64), even if there is no dialogue, Seneca identifies himself with Ascanius chasing wild boars, but this happens only because he is inspired by the reading of the great philosopher Sextius.

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but not a wise person, as someone who is only a few steps ahead of the reader and is still working on his moral improvement (34.2).[39]

If we turn to the other party in the relationship, the you/reader, we find positive and quite optimistic exhortations to fight, to go on, to achieve, and this validates the author Seneca's benevolence towards Lucilius, and more generally towards the reader, and his efforts to drive his occurrent self to rise to the level of his normative self, as Long puts it.[40] Nine times the addressee in the quotations is Aeneas: in those cases, it is not his weakness but his potential that is stressed; there is also, quoted twice, the famous *sic itur ad astra*, spoken by Apollo to Iulus after his first warlike enterprise (*Ep.* 48.11 and 73.15). In this way, the reader is twice gratified: first, by the identification with an epic hero—*the* epic hero of Roman tradition; second, by the optimistic view of his future, with gods on his side. Some quotations come from Aeneas' narrative, in *Aeneid* Books 2 and 3, of his enterprises to Dido, who is not addressed explicitly but, as any reader knows, is listening with a loving attitude. The reader is never identified with Turnus, so the overlap with epic characters is entirely positive and free from the shadow of a doomed destiny. This is further emphasized by the one case in which Seneca identifies himself with Virgil—namely, when, quoting the famous lines about Euryalus' and Nisus' deaths, he promises Lucilius immortality by dint of the value of his own literary work (21.5). In this letter, Seneca also refers to Cicero's and Epicurus' letters, but with the aforementioned quotation, besides flattering Lucilius with the perspective of long-lasting fame, he presents himself as the Virgil of epistolography.

7. CONCLUSION

The presence of a thread or development in Seneca's *Moral Epistles* is questionable. There are, of course, some key themes—death above all—and we may say that references to Epicurus tend to decrease as one reads along, while theoretical issues tend to increase, but there is no evident structure in the collection as a whole.[41] Conversely, if we read the Virgil quotations as a continuum, considering both their content and the implications of their oft-occurring dialogic form, we detect a narrative. We have already seen that, considered through the I/you relationship, the quotations depict, on one side, an author who plays his role of mentor without concealing his flaws and failures and, on the other side, a reader who is committed to his own moral improvement, and is exhorted to go on. Seneca's dialogue with Virgil is developed through an overlap between Virgilian and epistolary dialogues.

[39] Cf. 38.1, 52.7, 68.9, 75.1 and 75.15.

[40] A.A. Long, 'Seneca on the self: why now?', in S. Bartsch and D. Wray (edd.), *Seneca and the Self* (Cambridge, 2009), 20–36; cf. M.-F. Delpeyroux, 'Temps, philosophie et amitié dans les *Lettres à Lucilius*', in L. Nadjo and É. Gavoille (edd.), *Epistulae antiquae. Actes du II^e colloque international 'Le genre épistolaire antique et ses prolongements européenns'* (Louvain and Paris, 2002), 203–21; C. Edwards, 'The epistolographic self: the role of the individual in Seneca's letters', in L.R. Niehoff and J. Levinson (edd.), *Self, Self-Fashioning and Individuality in Late Antiquity* (Tübingen, 2019), 227–52, at 230. In this paper, I leave aside the question of the authenticity of Seneca's *Moral Epistles*; for some bibliographical references besides Inwood (n. 35 [2005]), see, for example, M.T. Griffin, *Seneca. A Philosopher in Politics* (Oxford, 1992[2]), 16–19; G. Mazzoli, 'Le *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium* di Seneca. Valore letterario e filosofico', *ANRW* 2.36.3 (1989), 1846–50; Lana (n. 11); M. Wilson, 'Seneca's *Epistles* reclassified', in S.J. Harrison (ed.), *Text, Ideas, and the Classics. Scholarship, Theory, and Classical Literature* (Oxford, 2001), 164–87; Graver and Long (n. 23), 1–6; A. Wilcox, *The Gift of Correspondence in Classical Rome. Friendship in Cicero's* Ad familiares *and Seneca's* Moral Epistles (Madison, WI, 2018), 114; C. Edwards, *Seneca: Selected Letters* (Cambridge, 2019), 5–6.

[41] For a recent overview, see Inwood (n. 35 [2007]), 134–5.

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There are further considerations regarding the content of the quotations. The groups of themes discussed above (fate, fighting, death) are not spread uniformly through the letters: references to gods, fortune and virtue tend to decrease toward the end of the collection, as do those to voyages, while references to death tend to increase: there are three of them in the last six quotations, where, as we have seen, Turnus' words feature strongly. Seneca says very little about his personal life in his letters, and nothing about his political situation, while he presents himself as an urbane master of philosophy, yet his choice of lines from the *Aeneid* reveals an increasing pessimism in his view of life, as well as a focus on death in its most terrifying apparel. It is perhaps not a coincidence that Virgilian quotations are concentrated in Seneca's last works, the *Natural Questions* and especially the *Moral Epistles*,[42] and that the last reference to divine providence is negative: *dis aliter uisum* (*Aen.* 2.428 in *Ep.* 98.4),[43] words that Aeneas pronounces on the premature death of a young and brave warrior, Ripheus. Even if Seneca does not share in the thought of those words, proposing instead the opposite *di melius* (*Ep.* 98.5), the hemistich is easily supplied in the reader's mind, and it is hard not to be reminded of Seneca's political ruin. The very last reference to the divine, which is also the last quotation from the *Aeneid* in the collection, refers to the wise person's soul (115.5), in an atmosphere of detachment from earthly matters. So, contrary to what one may think at first sight, quotations from the *Aeneid* in Seneca's *Moral Epistles* tell a story, moving from fighting against the difficulties of life toward accepting death.

To return to my title: it is undoubtedly the case that Seneca uses Virgilian quotations to support, as examples or as counterpoints, his Stoic arguments. Still, given the considerations presented here, it would in my opinion be reductive to present Seneca's *Aeneid* as a Stoic reading of the poem. I would say, rather, that his choices are generally indicative of an intimate, somehow existential use of this poem. Indeed, he uses Virgil's lines to describe his coming to terms with death. Even if he avoids bloody descriptions and tragic scenes, Seneca seems to express through the Virgilian quotations an increasing anxiety matching his self-representation as a frail and doubtful hero. The pacified master of philosophy, seen through the lines of the *Aeneid*, is still thoughtfully concerned about his pupil, but is nevertheless filled with his own uncertainties. Seneca chooses Virgil to express his intimate anxiety, or, more correctly, the intimate anxiety of the author of the letters; in doing so, he presents his own *Aeneid.*

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[42] André (n. 9), 220–1.
[43] Gambla (n. 9), 110–11.

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