

## Virgil's *Aeneid* in Neronian Literature<sup>1</sup>

Virgil's *Aeneid* has left an infinitely quotable legacy. Considered by many generations the pinnacle of Latin literature, it was all-but-required reading for the Roman elite from Augustus onward. The influence of the *Aeneid* on the extant works of the Silver Age of Latin literature is clear, though it takes various forms. Lucan's *Bellum Civile* explicitly draws from the epic tradition Romanized by the *Aeneid*. But works outside the *Aeneid*'s style often recall the famous poem. Seneca's moralizing letters frequently quote Virgil, sometimes with named source and sometimes leaving the identification up to the reader. Petronius' *Satyricon*, epic-like in scope but picaresque in construction, alludes to the high-culture *Aeneid* to underscore the lowliness of its own characters. This paper will examine more precisely Seneca's and Petronius' relationship to the *Aeneid* and how the celebrated work is treated in the age of Nero.

Though the majority of the *Satyricon* is lost to time, what remains gives a modern reader a general sense of the work. The story progresses episodically, often with nonsensical transitions, characters disappearing and reappearing as suits the plot. A mixture of prose and poetry, the *Satyricon* straddles genres, tones, and styles. However, while the work has a Virgilian scope, the subject matter defines it as an epic farce. This vast dichotomy is underscored in two main ways. At times Petronius openly parodies the *Aeneid* in substance and style. Moreover, storytelling within the *Satyricon*, both prosaic and poetic, is treated with the respect of an epic, especially when that respect is undeserved.

A few passing moments in the *Satyricon* refer casually to the *Aeneid*. In Chapter 72, as Encolpius and company try to escape the chaos of Trimalchio's dinner, a dog attacks Ascyllus

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<sup>1</sup> Regarding citations: (*Aen.* I.2) refers to *Aeneid*, Book I, line 2 in translation, not in Latin; (*Ep.* 1.2) refers to Seneca's Letter 1, Section 2 in translation; and (*Sat.* 1) refers to Chapter 1 of the *Satyricon* in translation.

and sends him 'into the fish-pond'. Giton abates the savage beast by throwing it some 'tit-bits from ... dinner' so that they might make their escape (*Sat.* 72). This scene echoes Aeneas' encounter with Cerberus in the underworld in *Aeneid* Book VI, where he is preserved by the Sibyl's sense to 'throw [Cerberus] a honeyed cake' (*Aen.* VI.554). Though the reference is brief, the subject matter is such that the epic tradition is necessarily brought to the reader's mind. Similarly, when a storm hits the ship in Chapter 114, the language used throughout recalls the storm in Book I. The 'impenetrable darkness' mirrors the 'black night hang[ing] on the waters', and the furious winds batter the two vessels equally (*Sat.* 114; *Aen.* I.128).

These moments in particular occur after extended farcical scenes. The majority of Trimalchio's dinner is comical past reason, and the affair comes to a climax with Trimalchio's mock funeral and the decision to extend the dinner 'two days [from] one' (*Sat.* 72). For Petronius to progress the narrative, he crafts Encolpius' exit to recall Aeneas' perilous entry to the underworld. Before the ship is hit by the poetic storm, its crew members have been resolving confused identities and fighting. Their brawling hits a fever pitch when the slave-boy Giton, holding a blunted razor blade to 'his manhood', coerces the opposing sides into a formal 'truce' and 'parley' to avoid this terrifying emasculation (*Sat.* 108). After the identities are resolved, Petronius may then destroy the ship in epic fashion, thereby allowing the main characters a new situation to compel into farce.

Petronius' storytellers are also given the resources of the epic tradition for their tales. In the aforementioned scene, Petronius' delusional poet Eumolpus spins a yarn on the 'fickleness' of women 'in love' (*Sat.* 110). He describes how a widow, 'celebrated ... for [her] chastity' far and wide, comes to submit to a soldier's charms and defile her husband's corpse (*Sat.* 111). The widow's maid, who had been an equal partner in fasting and mourning, is 'seduced by the

fragrance of [the soldier's] wine', and in turn tempts her mistress to give in (*Sat.* 111). The maid and the soldier speak to the widow just as Anna speaks to Dido in Book IV of the *Aeneid*. Dido fears she would 'break [Shame's] laws' by pursuing 'the only man ... who overturn[s] [her] shifting heart' (*Aen.* IV.25-6,33). Dido and Eumolpus' widow share the same concern; they fear that they might betray their dead husbands' memory. But Dido's husband has been long dead, and the 'queen of marriages' herself sets the stage for her 'mating' with the hero Aeneas (*Aen.* IV.220,222). The widow gives into her feelings within the very tomb her husband was buried 'five days' before with a crass 'soldier' tasked with 'guarding some crosses' nearby (*Sat.* 111). Petronius places the tactics that overthrew even the queen of Carthage in the mouths of the soldier and widow's maid to showcase the lack of any nobility in Eumolpus' story.

Near the end of the extant *Satyricon*, in the surviving, fragmentary text, Virgil's words are again quoted verbatim to aggrandize the scene. Because he is pursued by the wrath of Priapus, Encolpius has numerous erectile difficulties throughout the *Satyricon*. No better in the entire work is this trouble depicted than Chapter 132, with an image taken from Aeneas' encounter with Dido's shade in the underworld. In that scene, Aeneas, 'weeping', tries to make amends with his scorned lover, but she offers no reply to him (*Aen.* VI.615). Encolpius' 'wanton parts' respond to his angry tirade in near-identical terms, too humorous not to reproduce except in full:

She looked away, and kept her eyes fixed on the ground.  
Her face was no more softened by these opening words  
Than pliant willow, or poppy with its drooping head (*Sat.* 132).

In the *Aeneid*, this last line instead has Dido further hardening at Aeneas' prayers, before she 'fle[es] – still his enemy – into the forest' (*Aen.* VI.619-21). In Encolpius' case, his hopes are defeated by a further softening, and the reader can enjoy the thought of the 'fearful member'

subsequently dashing off (*Sat.* 132). Petronius masterfully inverts Aeneas' sorrow at Dido's hardening, instead having Encolpius, ashamed, pondering the wisdom of 'having exchanged words' with his 'pliant willow' (*Sat.* 132). Again, Petronius' appropriation of Virgil's words for his lewd purpose is highly effective and gives credence to the earlier title of epic farce.

We now turn to our other Neronian author. While addressed to a single man, Lucilius, Seneca's letters were written for mass readership. Seneca published formal philosophical writings, but these letters offer more accessible wisdom in a smaller package. Because we have a partial chronology for these letters, we can chart the evolution from short and conversational to lengthy and nuanced writings, where the later letters often build upon themes of the earlier. Seneca not only makes liberal use of the *Aeneid* throughout his extant letters, but also alludes to the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and Virgil's other poems, namely the *Georgics* and *Eclogues*. He seems to recall these poetic works for three main purposes. First, as in the *Satyricon*, Seneca's language will take a turn for the Virgilian, either explicitly or implicitly, to add weight to an anecdote, which in turn emphasizes a philosophical argument. Second, Seneca uses Virgil's words when he himself cannot find better words, and may additionally call upon the context of the passage in the *Aeneid* to strengthen his philosophy. Finally, Seneca subtly examines the *Aeneid* in terms of Stoicism and passes judgment, with varying levels of success.

In Letter 53, one of the first allusions to the *Aeneid* in the chronology of his letters, Seneca recalls a daunting sea trip he once took. After leaving the shore, where the waters were calm, the 'sea ... heave[s]' and seasickness grips Seneca (*Ep.* 53.1). Our narrator cannot abide the choppy waters and demands the boat be driven to shore, despite the helmsman's protest. Here, Seneca does not act like the Trojans, who land their ships with tact and grace, but leaps from the ship and swims to shore. Seneca's action is all the more foolhardy given the context of

his quote. He references *Aeneid* VI.3, where the Trojans have dropped anchor near the home of the Sybil. In the passage before, at the end of Book V, Palinurus, helmsman of Aeneas' ship, has just been 'cast ... headlong into the' sea, lost in the 'limpid waters', never to be seen alive again (*Aen.* V.1134-5). But Seneca escapes Palinurus' harrowing fate, and when at last he pulls himself onto the shore, he marvels 'beyond belief' what he has just 'suffered' and 'endured' (*Ep.* 53.3-4). In truth, he has endured little beyond his own foolishness, but uses this story to juxtapose great physical suffering and mental illness, which comprise the heart of his philosophical argument here. In this case, as in the *Satyricon*, the *Aeneid* is used to artificially raise the stakes of the situation.

This tactic is repeated in Letter 56, though the allusion closes the letter rather than opening it. Seneca has taken up residence above a public bath as a test to his concentration. Night and day, there is some agent in the vicinity causing a ruckus that cannot escape Seneca's artistic description. He argues that the only state of calm is a calm of the mind, which can exist regardless of external serenity. As an example, he describes Aeneas' flight from Troy with his son and father. Living above a noisy bathhouse is nothing compared to 'whirring spears' and 'weapons jostling' as the Greeks capture Troy, but Seneca as an aspiring wise man sees himself facing just this type of challenge in his own way (*Ep.* 56.13). Seneca implies that he has overcome the challenge, and will move out shortly. He ends the letter by departing the bathhouse just as Aeneas escaped the burning walls of Troy.

Interestingly, this passage and the last have complementary references to the *Odyssey*. In Letter 56, Seneca rationalizes his retreat from the bathhouse in terms of Ulysses' 'easy cure' when dealing with the Sirens. As an epic hero, Ulysses is a wise man, and like Seneca, Ulysses is defending himself against offensive noise. Because, again, the stakes are much greater in the

epic hero's case, if Ulysses does not deem it necessary to resist the Sirens prolongedly, Seneca need not stay above the bathhouse. In Letter 53, Seneca also compares himself to Ulysses in his sea misadventures. Ulysses did not 'suffer shipwreck everywhere' due to the wrath of the gods, but because he 'was prone to seasickness' (*Ep.* 54.4). There is no reading of the *Odyssey* that could support this argument, but Seneca makes the attempt. This allusion may be touched with humor, as Seneca quips that it will take him twenty years to 'reach ... anywhere [he is] obliged to sail' (*Ep.* 54.4). In any case, this second epic parallel is drawn to boost Seneca's Stoic struggle further.

Seneca raises a substantive issue in Letter 56 beyond dramatizing his own life. He writes that Aeneas' 'burdens ... make him scared', and a similar phenomenon occurs with 'lucky men' and their 'pieces of baggage' (*Ep.* 56.13-4). But here Aeneas' 'baggage' is his son and father, whom Venus had bid Aeneas seek and rescue (*Aen.* II.805-8). Since Aeneas is a wise man, he should accept the rationality of the universe, but here Seneca decries Aeneas for 'hear[ing] each sound as threatening' because he worries for his family (*Ep.* 56.13). This points to the second use of the *Aeneid* in Seneca's letters: to use the work as supporting evidence for Stoicism or to impose Stoic ideas onto it. In this case, because Venus is a divine actor, it is impossible within the context of the *Aeneid* to expect Aeneas to act outside her wishes. However, it should not trouble Aeneas that his family is in danger, since the universe is unquestionably rational. This points to an inherent difficulty between Stoicism and the epic tradition. Seneca seems to claim that Aeneas cannot be a wise man for his pious concern, but this piety is central to Aeneas' character and to Roman morality at large. The Roman reader admires Aeneas' love for his infant son and father, and we must reject Seneca's solely Stoic criticism.

A central theme of Stoicism that Seneca brings up in multiple letters is that the wise man is always satisfied at the end of each day not to live another. Letter 12, the last letter included in his first book, contains the first reference to the *Aeneid*, namely Dido's lament in Book IV. In her last few lines, Dido 'mounts ... [the] high pyre' and proclaims that she has 'lived ... and journeyed the course assigned by Fortune' (*Aen.* IV.900-1). Dido makes this declaration 'without anxiety ... for the next day', since she is denying herself any more days (*Ep.* 12.9). The Stoic wise man is asked to have this same mindset with uncertainty about the future. Seneca does not pass judgment on Dido in particular; the quote is unattributed, naming neither Virgil nor Dido. As a woman, Dido cannot be a role model like Aeneas or Ulysses, but Virgil's poetry is too brilliant to pass up. In this letter, the *Aeneid* is used only as a work of art, and the extraordinary pathos present in the context of the lament is not activated.

In Letter 59, Seneca attempts to differentiate between false joys and the joys of the wise man. At the start of the letter, he criticizes Virgil's description of the 'evil joys (*gaudia*) of the mind'<sup>2</sup> because true *gaudia* cannot be evil; Seneca applies the word *voluptas* to the concept Virgil addresses (*Ep.* 59.3). But Seneca uses another excerpt from Book VI to underscore this point. After much philosophical deliberation, Seneca caps the letter with 'that Virgilian line' spoken by Deiphobus, son of Priam, to Aeneas in the underworld. Remembering the fall of Troy, Deiphobus miserably recalls 'that last night ... spent in false joys (*gaudia*)' (*Ep.* 59.17). Seneca in a few sweeping statements ends the letter by denigrating 'self-indulgent men' like the Trojans who have 'worn themselves out' with vice (*Ep.* 59.17-8). The reader cannot help but recall the horror of the destruction of Troy, which is reflected in Deiphobus' appearance in the lines immediately prior, with 'body mangled' and 'face torn savagely' (*Aen.* VI.652-3). Seneca

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<sup>2</sup> Fantham prefers 'joys' in translation, but Mandelbaum here and below translates *gaudia* as 'pleasures', apparently answering Seneca's complaint.

illustrates his philosophical argument by comparing the self-indulgent man and the maimed Trojan. Seneca takes Virgil's reproof of Trojan vice and, introducing Stoic vocabulary, uses the exact point to apply to his readership at large.

Letters 107 and 108 also allude to Aeneas' descent into Orcus, but these letters differ greatly from each other in length and subject matter. Letter 107 discusses the Stoic practice of anticipating future ills. On the occasion that Lucilius has had a slave escape, Seneca waxes characteristically bleak and reminds the reader that he must 'pass [his] life' amongst 'Grief and goading Cares ... pale Diseases ... and Fear and Hunger' (*Ep.* 107.3; *Aen.* VI.364-6). Seneca urges 'constant meditation' on these and other issues, so that even if he were 'at the jaws of Orcus' itself, he would be 'ready and unflagging' for what might happen (*Ep.* 107.4,12; *Aen.* VI.363). Letter 108 takes up, among many other topics, the dismal 'sickness [of] old age' (*Ep.* 108.28). Seneca so admires Virgil's descriptions of old age that he quotes both the *Aeneid* and the *Georgics* to make perfectly clear that 'the best time of life ... is first to flee' (*Ep.* 108.24). In these consecutive letters, Aeneas journey into the underworld at once represents the worst case of life and the inevitable situation of death. Seneca effectively calls upon Virgil's poetry to demonstrate the unhappy end that the reader, and more immediately Seneca himself, must inevitably face.

Despite all the aforementioned allusions to the *Aeneid*, Seneca appears to be grappling with a major difficulty in remaining true to his Stoic beliefs. Letter 49 approaches the motif of the brevity of life through the lens of eschewing 'superfluous activities' (*Ep.* 49.5). He takes up Cicero's point that lyric poetry is playful and could 'trick [the reader] into judging' it to 'contain some great and secret good', which Seneca hints cannot be present (*Ep.* 49.6). He describes the necessity of avoiding such trivialities with the language of battle. The 'din of war echoing

around' him, Seneca warns against the 'foolish games' of riddling and other 'clever aberration' (*Ep.* 49.7-9). Even Seneca's everyday struggle against literature is described in terms of the Trojans' struggle against the Rutulians.

But this point is recalled in a later letter. Letter 88 broadens the category of what pastimes are unworthy to include the liberal arts at large. While he does not at first mention the *Aeneid*, Seneca proclaims he 'ha[s] no time' to study 'the route of Ulysses' wanderings' or 'to investigate the age of Patroclus and Achilles' among other literary questions (*Ep.* 88.6-7). Seneca warns that 'the pursuit of the liberal arts' can make a 'man preoccupied in ... superfluous furnishing of culture' (*Ep.* 88.36-7). Superfluous is *supervacua* in both cases, so the reader may conclude that epic poetry joins lyric poetry explicitly in the sub-philosophical arts. However, given the breadth of Virgilian allusions within the letters as a whole, Seneca himself must be intimately aware with the details of the text, and for his readership to understand, they must be equally familiar. There are two possible resolutions to this problem. On the one hand, Seneca may be writing specifically for his elite Roman audience and using the popular (though for un-Stoic reasons) work of literature as evidence. But more likely, Seneca enjoys the *Aeneid* per se, despite what he preaches in his letters.

This allows for a general conclusion on the *Aeneid*'s use in Seneca's letters and how it differs from the *Aeneid* in the Satyricon. Throughout his letters, Seneca uses the poem for philosophical means and attempts to justify his love for it by finding Stoic utility. When Virgil's words are related verbatim, often their context within the *Aeneid* is activated, but occasionally Seneca simply prefers the epic poet's imagery to his own. In Letter 108, Seneca references Virgil in three separate works and uses this multiplicity as philosophical authority. While it is unlikely that Virgil was writing for a Stoic purpose, Seneca strives to bring the *Aeneid* into what

he perceives as the literary vogue of the Neronian age. Petronius stuffs the *Satyricon* with overwhelming farce, but in order to maintain the epic conceit, recalls Virgil to string one humorous episode to the next. Petronius memorializes the *Aeneid* through parody, using Virgil's style in a new literary context – the novel – that would indeed outlast the epic in popularity. Although the *Aeneid* is a product of a by-gone age of Latin literature, the authors of the Silver Age preserve its style and story wholeheartedly and help secure its place in posterity.

## Works Cited

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