Advances in Social Science and Culture
ISSN 2640-9682 (Print) ISSN 2640-9674 (Online)
Vol. 7, No. 1, 2025
www.scholink.org/ojs/index.php/assc

Original Paper

Lucius Annaeus Seneca: Moral Letters to Thomas More

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Received: January 12, 2025 Accepted: February 11, 2025 Online Published: February 27, 2025

doi:10.22158/assc.v7n1p110 URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/assc.v7n1p110

Abstract

This essay concludes a personal investigation, undertaken in two previous works, concerning certain similarities between Seneca and Thomas More, and instances where the influence of the Roman Stoic can be found in the works of the great English humanist. I shall focus, in particular, on the extraordinary skill Seneca and More both display in delving into the human soul and his psychology. With this last endeavor, in which I have allowed myself a slight flight of fancy, I hope to interest not just the scholar, but even the common reader.

Keywords

Virtues, Conscience, Human Soul, Stoicism, Christian Humanism

1. Introduction

I have already devoted two articles to Seneca and More: the first article was published in Italian in *Acta Philosophica*, (Faro, 2018) the other in English in *Moreana* (Faro, 2020). In the latter, I pointed out the presence of at least four implicit quotes from Seneca, as well as an explicit one, taken from the *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium* (*Moral Letters to Lucilius*, hereafter: *EML*) (Note 1), a work More must have known well, some of them quite relevant. In this essay, the last in the triad, I would like to add a few other passages and significant forms of influence Seneca had on the works of Thomas More. I shall not revisit here the historical events of the two characters, which I already described at length in my previous articles.

In his letters to the younger Lucilius, Seneca provides a sort of lay spiritual guidance. In order to make the present essay more compelling, let us enact something similar, imagining a hypothetical correspondence between Seneca and the younger More, almost as if they were contemporaries. Let us pretend Seneca has indulged in a brief vacation, after relinquishing his post as Nero's counselor (AD 62). He sails off to Spain, towards the Pillars of Hercules, but a mysterious storm blows his ship beyond them and—after three weeks in the open seas—lands him on the island of Utopia, beyond time, where visitors can entertain a correspondence with people of different epochs, as if they were

contemporaries.

Utopia is an island where wise people are at ease, since the role of reason—and particularly moral philosophy—is highly acknowledged here (Note 2). The moral philosophy of Utopians turns out to be quite close to Seneca's. (see *CW* 4, 160-2) There is also an open appreciation of moderate, natural physical and mental pleasure (see *ibid.*, 166-78), which Seneca allows, in contrast to the traditional Stoic rigor against it, asserting pleasure should «not be the guide but the companion of a right, thinking and honorable mind.» (*De vita beata*, 8) A temperate pleasure which is also compatible with the Christianity of More, who knows to thank God for the joys of life. Travellers who thus reach Utopia, however, cannot stay there longer than three months, and must then return to their habitual space-time coordinates and their own history.

Raphael Hythlodaeus, the discoverer of Utopia, often returns there and is in charge of putting in touch personalities of various epochs who show affinities. He thus decides to have Seneca write to Thomas More, who, although remaining in England, is very glad to correspond with the Roman philosopher he already knows through reading some of his works. In my previously mentioned article in *Moreana*, I point out that More did not attribute the same pre-eminence as Seneca—as a politician—did to state interest, nor the political theology derived therefrom (pp. 82-86).

This notwithstanding, it is clear he admired the pagan philosopher from several other points of view. However, in a fictional correspondence between the two intellectuals, we can imagine More would underline—as was his wont—what brought them close and not what divided them. He is also glad to accept precious counsel from someone who, though guided just by reason, at least makes good use of it, while he is forced to live surrounded by Christian kingdoms—almost constantly at war with one another—where not only faith, but even reason appears to have grown weak (see *CW*, 216-22). More, at that moment, finds himself in a situation similar to that of Seneca: he has just resigned from the office of Chancellor of England (1532).

Mysterious winged messengers allow mail to go back and forth from Utopia within a day, as if both More and Seneca were in London or Rome. Obviously, they use Latin, which I shall here—almost always—translate into English. Both intellectuals appreciate in Utopia the rational nature of the islanders' faith in the unknown God of philosophers, the immortality of the soul, reward and punishment in the afterlife, as well as the religious tolerance established by the kingdom's founder, Utopus.

Utopians for the most part do not yet know Christ, who has only been recently announced there. Of this religion, Seneca admits he has heard something thanks to a certain Paul of Tarsus—a Roman citizen who appealed to the emperor's court—and who he took pains to have acquitted some time before. Once he has arrived on such an exotic isle, so distant from the world he knows, in his first letter to More (whom Raphael Hythlodaeus has told him much about), he says he has found confirmation of what he had always thought:

there is implanted in everyone an idea concerning deity, and there is no people so far beyond the reach

of laws and customs that it does not believe at least in gods of some sort. And when we discuss the immortality of the soul, we are influenced in no small degree by the general opinion of mankind, who either fear or worship the spirits of the lower world. (*EML* 117, 6)

2. Correspondence between Seneca and More

More introduces himself, disclosing that he has written a book about the wise government he discovered to exist on that lucky island. To break the ice, he asks Seneca whether it is necessary to place liberal studies first, in education. The answer is the following: «do the liberal studies contribute nothing to our welfare? Very much in other respects, but nothing at all as regards virtue.» (*EML* 88.20) But what is culture worth without virtue? «Those alone are really liberal—or rather, to give them a truer name, "free"—whose concern is virtue.» (*EML* 88. 23) For «the virtue we aim at raises to a splendid eminence... because the soul is emancipated, prepared for the knowledge of heavenly things, and rendered worthy of entering into communion with God.» (preface to the *Naturales Quaestiones* 1.5)

More is pleased with the answer. And he confesses that he himself wrote the following recommendations to William Gonell, tutor to his four children: «warn my children [...] to put virtue in the first place among goods, knowledge in the second.» (Rogers, n. 61)

In my first article on Seneca, I pointed out various affinities between the two figures, including a shared interest in the problem of how to combine active and contemplative life (see Faro, 2018, 89-90). More writes now to his friend on this topic, and Seneca is more than willing to answer: «nature [...] intended me to do both, to practice both contemplation and action: and I do both, because even contemplation is not devoid of action.» (*De otio* 5.8) Therefore, «these things ought to be combined and blended together.» (*ibid*. 6.2) And furthermore: «it is by far the best plan [...] to mingle leisure with business.» (*De tranqullitate animi*, 4.8) It is a matter of concentration: «the mind is fully master of itself, and can, at its pleasure, find seclusion even in the midst of business; the man, however, who is always selecting resorts and hunting for leisure, will find something to distract his mind in every place.» (*EML* 104.7)

More appreciates the advice and—connecting it to his faith-writes:

I wish that, whatever our bodies may be doing, we would at the same time constantly lift up our minds to God (which is the most acceptable form of prayer). For no matter where we may turn our steps, as long as our minds are directed to God, we clearly do not turn away from him who is present everywhere. (*EW*, 1259)

Seneca seems then to inspire in his young friend the use of this metaphor regarding the relationship between soul and body:

the choice of neat clothing is a fitting object of a man's efforts; for man is by nature a neat and well-groomed animal. Hence the choice of neat attire, and not neat attire in itself, is a good; since the good is not in the thing selected, but in the quality of the selection. Our actions are honorable, but not the actual things which we do. And you may assume that what I have said about dress applies also to

the body. For nature has surrounded our soul with the body as a sort of garment; the body is its cloak. (*EML* 92. 12-13)

More echoes this metaphor in his *De Tristitia Christi*, where he mentions the episode of the youth who followed Christ on the Mount of Olives (Mk 14: 51-52), but then—to escape the soldiers who sought to arrest him—left in their hands the sheet in which he had hurriedly clothed himself and fled naked into the night. In commenting the episode, More wrote:

the body is, as it were, the garment of the soul. The soul puts on the body when it comes into the world and takes off the body when it leaves the world at death. Hence, just as the clothes are worth much less than the body, so too the body is far less precious than the soul. Thus, to give away the soul to buy the body is the same kind of raving lunacy as to prefer the loss of a cloak to the loss of the body. (*EW*, 1296)

I had quoted this metaphor in the closing lines of my previous article in *Moreana*, but I had not yet realized the existence of a precedent in Seneca.

More then recounts to the Roman philosopher a bitter experience from his past, with «a great man... but glorious was he very far above all measure and that was a great pity, for it did harm, and made him abuse many great gifts God had given him. Never was he satiated of hearing his own praise.» (*CW* 12, 213) Well, on a certain occasion, this person had asked him an unbiased opinion, telling him to have no fear of saying the plain truth, about the clauses of an international treaty which he had just drafted, enticed by the great commendation he expected. More, however, who was himself a very skilled diplomat, had pointed out that there was a flaw in the treaty, which sent into a rage the important personage, who was expecting only unconditional praise (*ibid.* 217-8). The episode was known even to William Shakespeare (his knowledge of Thomas More's works is ever surprising), who reveals the identity of the person in the part he wrote of Henry VIII (*Act One*, *Scene One*):

This cunning cardinal [Thomas Wolsey]
The articles o' th' combination drew
As himself pleas'd; and they were ratified
As he cried 'Thus let be' to as much end
As give a crutch to th' dead. But our Count-Cardinal
Has done this, and 'tis well; for worthy Wolsey
Who cannot err, he did it.

It would seem the cardinal did not much take into account More's criticism...

Seneca answers by mentioning the case of an acquaintance who seldom comes to see him «for no other reason than that he is afraid to hear the truth, and at present he is removed from any danger of hearing it; for one must not talk to a man unless he is willing to listen.» (*EML* 29.1)

More agrees. After that episode, he resolved never again to say the truth to that personage.

Then, he asks his friend for his opinion on the role of fortune in a person's life. On this topic, Seneca states: «fortune has no jurisdiction over character.» (*ibid.* 36.6) Therefore, «a man [...] will not attain

the Good which is unalloyed and beyond the reach of threats, unless he is sure in dealing with that which is unsure.» (*ibid.* 98.3) One must remember that «fortune has not the long reach with which we credit her; she can seize none except him that clings to her.» (*ibid.* 82.5)

Even More believes the gifts of fortune to be fleeting. One must always be wary of fortune. When he ends up in prison, at a rare moment in which he sees a glimmer of hope of safety, he writes verses on Fortune, which conclude as follows: «Sometimes, she looks as lovely fair, and bright/... /She beckketh and smiles upon every wight./But this feigned cheer many not abide; /There comes a cloud, and farewell all our pride.» (*Fortune Verses*, vv. 102-105)

2.1 Customs in Common

Writing to each other, the two friends also discover other common habits. One of them springs from the desire to make good use of the limited time of our life. Seneca reflects: «Mark also how much [time] is lost even when many are very careful: people are robbed of one thing by ill-health and of another thing by illness in the family; at one time private, at another public, business absorbs the attention; and all the while sleep shares our lives with us.» (*EML* 117.32) Therefore, Seneca reminds his friend that he never spends the day in idleness, and even steals hours away from the night: «I appropriate even a part of the night for study. I do not allow time for sleep but yield to it when I must, and when my eyes are wearied with waking.» (*ibid*. 8.1) And he concludes: «we are deceived by those who would have us believe that a multitude of affairs block their pursuit of liberal studies [...] my time is free; it is indeed free, and wherever I am, I am master of myself.» (*ibid*. 62.1)

More agrees, but confides to his friend how much studying and writing has cost him, as it has meant subtracting the time for sleep from great part of the night (Note 3), to pray and work on his studies of the humanities: «among these things now rehearsed steal away the day, the month, the year. When do I write then? And all this while I have spoken no word of sleep, neither yet of meals, which among a great number do waste no less time than does *sleep*, *wherein almost half the time of man creepeth away*.» (letter to Peter Giles, in CW 4,38, italics added) (Note 4). Seneca agrees with More's observation on the time—excessive for some—spent on meals. Not coincidentally, when he was his political advisor, he had obtained from Nero to be exempted from taking part in the imperial banquets (which sometimes even degenerated into lewd orgies). He preferred to eat soberly from the produce of his vegetable garden, giving his ill health as a reason (even Tacitus mentioned this: *Annales* 15.45).

Another common habit they have is examining their conscience in the evening, a habit for which Seneca thanks Pythagoras and the school of philosophy founded in Rome by Quintus Sextius, who recommended this practice. Therefore, «when the lamp is taken out of my sight, and my wife, who knows my habit, has ceased to talk, I pass the whole day in review before myself, and repeat all that I have said and done: I conceal nothing from myself, and omit nothing.» (*De Ira* 3.36)

More answers he shares this useful practice, which is recommended by his religion, and already contained in a writing earlier than Pythagoras': «speak in your hearts, and on your beds keep silence» (Ps 4:5). He also asks Seneca what the use of it is. Seneca promptly answers that it allows one to see

one's faults, and «indeed this very fact is proof that my spirit is altered into something better, that it can see its own faults, of which it was previously ignorant. In certain cases sick men are congratulated because they themselves have perceived that they are sick.» (*EML* 6.1)

Finally, we can add that they behaved in the same way regarding wealth. More says he is pleased to have encountered a passage in Seneca which seems a good comment on the first beatitude enunciated by Christ: «blessed are the poor in spirit» (Mt 5:3). For Seneca had confessed:

he also is great-souled, who sees riches heaped up round him and, after wondering long and deeply because they have come into his possession, smiles, and hears rather than feels that they are his. [...] nor do I [...] know whether the poor man [...] will despise riches, should he suddenly fall into them; accordingly, in the case of both, it is the mind that must be appraised. (*EML* 20.10-11)

As a political advisor of Nero, Seneca had accumulated a fortune in land and gardens received from the emperor, which were worth overall 300 million sesterces (See Tacitus, *Annales* 13.42). But, not wanting to have anything more to do with Nero after the latter's turn to despotism, he had politely returned all the gifted estates when he had resigned from his office. The emperor, thankful and thirsting as he was after riches for his new construction projects, had been happy to accept them (see Dio Cassius, *Historia Romana* 62,25.3).

More, who as Chancellor of the kingdom of England enjoyed a high position, lodged at his own expense a poor widow in his home, and also maintained an alms-house he founded. (see Th. Stapleton, pdf 40/70-80). He wrote something similar in his last work:

one sees rich men-less often, it is true, than I would like—but still, thank God, one sometimes sees exceedingly rich men who would rather lose everything they have than keep anything at all by offending God through sin. [...] On the other hand we see people—and far more of them than I would wish – who happen to have only light garments and quite skimpy outfits and yet have so welded their affections to those poor riches of theirs that you could sooner strip skin from flesh than separate them from their goods. (*CW* 14, 601-4).

2.2 Fruitfulness of some of Seneca's Intuitions

In another letter, More thanks Seneca heartily because the truth of certain profound judgments on the human spirit penned by Seneca inspired in him extremely dramatic, allusive scenes which More then transferred to some of his work particularly, in the drafting of *The History of King Richard III*. Intrigued, Seneca asks him to be more explicit and detail where More is indebted to him. And More cites Seneca's words: «what is more wretched than a man who forgets his benefits and clings to his injuries?» (*EML* 81.23) Yet this is a very frequent occurrence. More also quotes another passage of Seneca's: «we hold nothing dearer than a benefit, so long as we are seeking one; we hold nothing cheaper after we have received it. [...] We consider not what we have obtained, but what we are to seek.» (*ibid*. 81.28)

More, with an ounce of pride, affirms that in *King Richard* he expressed these maxims of Seneca's in an even more succinct, pithy manner when narrating the vicissitudes of Jane Shore, a woman who in

happy times had aided many, but then had found herself pilloried by King Richard, and was forgotten by the many she had helped. More wrote: «men use, if they have an evil turn, to write it in marble; and whoso doth us a good turn, we write it in dust.» (*CW* 2, 57)

But another consideration by Seneca was much more relevant for More, namely the following: «how often has so-called affliction been the source and the beginning of happiness! How often have privileges which we welcomed with deep thanksgiving built steps for themselves to the top of a precipice.» (*EML* 110.3). So that «there is nothing so certain among these objects of fear that it is not more certain still that things we dread sink into nothing and that things we hope for mock us.» (*Ibid.* 13.12)

More recalls other passages that go in the same direction: «we suffer more often in imagination than in reality. [...] Some things torment us more than they ought; some torment us before they ought; and some torment us when they ought not to torment us at all.» (*ibid.* 13.4-5) And he adds this passage by his mentor: «soldiers have often feared an enemy without reason, and the march which they thought most dangerous has in fact been most secure.» (*ibid.* 59.7)

As the episode was very well known, Seneca does not mention here the opposite case, which occurred to Varus's legionaries in AD 9: Varus's forces marched merrily and lightly, letting their carts carry their weapons and heavy armor, believing themselves to be completely safe. And they were slaughtered, helplessly, by the Germanic forces led by Arminius, who were lying in ambush behind a trench they had built in Teutoburg Forest. Arminius, a German chief who had obtained Roman citizenship and the equestrian rank, had convinced Varus that the march would take place in a friendly territory, with no risk whatsoever (see Dio Cassius, *Historia Romana,* 16,19.2-5). Three legions (15,000 men) were annihilated.

More confesses to Seneca that he used these intuitions of his more than once, with thespian sensitivity, in his above-mentioned account of Richard III. The first instance was in telling the story of Elizabeth, the wife of an enemy, who had died in battle, of King Edward IV. Widowed, she asked King Edward's mercy, imploring him to support her, alone and disgraced, and her children. Richard, struck by the refinement and composure of a still attractive woman, took her in marriage (*CW* 2,60-2). Thus she who warily approached the enemy of her late husband suddenly found herself risen to the rank of Queen of England, even obtaining reconciliation for her family. And More cites here another passage from Seneca: «Oftentimes a reverse has but made room for more prosperous fortune.» (*EML* 91.13)

Vice versa, More quotes the case of an opponent of queen Elizabeth, Lord Hastings, who just before entering a meeting with Richard III (brother of the deceased Edward), was exceedingly merry, believing he enjoyed the king's favor, having supported his conspiracy to take the throne to the detriment of Edward's adolescent sons. In More's *King Richard*, Hastings recounts to an old acquaintance how much unfounded fear and trepidation he once had on a certain occasion, which had then turned into unhoped-for joy. Yet, shortly afterwards, completely oblivious of his fate, on meeting with King Richard, he suddenly finds himself accused of treason, and is immediately sentenced to

death and executed—shortly after—in the palace courtyard (see *CW* 2,47-9).

More also tells Seneca he has long been thinking of writing a work on the passion of Christ (Christ who Seneca has heard something of, since he met Paul of Tarsus) and he already intends to use Seneca's fertile intuition to portray Judas' betrayal. More tells his friend he already has in mind how to describe how Judas and the armed band swarmed as they came to capture the Messiah on the Mount of Olives. He imagines the scene as follows:

all the while Christ was in taking, still stood with a full furious stomach this wretched traitor amongst those that took him, as their head captain and banner-bearer, triumphing of likelihood and rejoicing to behold what peril his own fellows and his master were in. And I verily think he looked for none other but to have had them taken and slain every one. [...] Thus was this traitor full glad, while he hoped to have had all his fellows in hold at once, and like a fool cast no perils of himself at all, nothing less mistrusting than that shortly after the dreadful sentence of God should light upon him. (*ibid*. 14, 455-8)

More's comment follows, in line with Seneca:

Here have I occasion to lament and bewail the blindness of our miserable mortal nature. For many times while we are in most trouble and fear, though we know it not, be we in most surety. And contrariwise, ofttimes we reckon ourselves surest and make most merry, then unawares stealeth death even suddenly on us. All the apostles save Judas were very sore afraid, reckoning to have been carried away and put to death with Christ. And yet were they all in case safely to escape, whereas Judas on the other side which nothing feared at all, but took pleasure to see them so afflicted, lost his life for ever and that in few hours after. (*ibid*. pp. 459-60).

More also reveals his great appreciation of Seneca's tragedies, in particular *Thyestes*, which denounces totalitarianism and includes a description of the end of the world (verses 875-884) in the triumph of moral evil, evoking the apocalypse prophecies of Christianity. Other verses from *Thyestes* (verses 957-960) are inserted by More in his *History of King Richard III* (See *CW* 2,44, where the verses from *Thyestes* appear in a somewhat free translation). But that is not all. Having noticed that Seneca was the only author in ancient classic literature, who-again, in *Thyestes* (verses 344 and following) – dared to write in iambic dimeter, More decided to imitate him in three of his Latin epigrams (see epigrams 109, 205, and 281, in L. Bradner & Ch. A. Lynch [eds.], 1953). More promises to send his friend Seneca his epigrams (Note 5).

2.3 A Common Way of Feeling

The English humanist then describes to Seneca how he reacted recently (just before being appointed Chancellor to the kingdom), to the news of a fire in his barns, and the loss of their stores of corn (end of August 1529). Finding himself in Woodstock with his king, he wrote to his wife giving her three charges: to summon all the household and thank God, keeping good cheer; to ensure that none of their neighbors bears any loss due to the calamity; not to discharge any farmer unless after having made sure they have found another employer (*CM*, no 174). He holds all that occurs to be ordained by Providence: God has given, God has taken away, but he must always be thanked.

Seneca writes back that he is pleased to see how his humanist friend faced this setback, showing the right attitude. That is why he wrote *De providentia*, to answer those who wonder how come adversities occur to good people. And he writes: «can you wonder at good men being shaken, in order that they may be strengthened? [...] and so it is to the advantage of good men, and causes them to be undismayed, that they should live much amidst alarms, and learn to bear with patience what is not evil save to him who endures it ill.» (*De providentia* 4.16) Therefore, «it is best [...] to attend uncomplainingly upon the God under whose guidance everything progresses; for it is a bad soldier who grumbles when following his commander.» (*EML* 107.12)

Finally, he confides to his friend:

when everything seems to go hard and uphill, I have trained myself not merely to obey God, but to agree with His decisions. I follow him because my soul wills it, and not because I must. Nothing will ever happen to me that I shall receive with ill humour or with a wry face. I shall pay up all my taxes willingly. (*Ibid*. 96.2)

More answers with two quotes from Paul of Tarsus: «*hilarem datorem diligit Deus*;» (2 Cor 9:7) and even «*omnia in bonum.*» (Rom 8:28) Seneca would have felt even closer to More if he had known the opinion of a certain Erasmus on the English humanist: «whatever comes his way that cannot be corrected, he comes to love just as wholeheartedly as if nothing better could have happened to him.» (Allen, 2750, 1906-1958)

On the topic of death, there is a certain analogy in the feelings of the pagan philosopher and his Christian friend, who notes (in *The Four Last Things*) what great benefit derives from meditating on death: «what profit and commodity cometh unto man's soul by the meditation of death is not only marked of the chosen people of God, but also of such as were the best sort among gentiles and paynims.» (*CW* 1,139) (Note 6). Seneca wrote: «Take my word for it: since the day you were born you are being led thither.» (*EML* 4.9). For «death has its fixed fule equitable and unavoidable.» (*ibid*. 30.11) But only those who have prepared long for it – such as an old friend of Seneca's, Aufidius Bassus – joyfully await its coming.

In turn, More will take his friend's invitation in composing a book of prayers, when he is imprisoned in the Tower of London, writing in his own hand: «to make death no stranger to me.» (the prayer which includes this verse can be found online at https://slmedia.org/blog/more-fisher-conscience) Furthermore, he tells Seneca his wish to have his epitaph state: «might [...] this tomb made for him in his life-time be not in vain, nor that he fear death coming upon him, but that he may willingly, for the desire of Christ, die and find death not utterly death to him, but the gate of a wealthier life.» (Allen, no 2831)

It must be noted that the hope of a happier life after death is found even in Seneca. In his last works, he abandons the traditional materialist theory of Stoic pantheism (and the connected flat myth of eternal return), embracing Platonic anthropology and eschatology, with consequent transcendence of. God. That is why he writes to More: «do you suppose that I am now referring to the Stoics, who hold that the soul of a man crushed by a great weight cannot abide, and is scattered forthwith, because it has not had

a free opportunity to depart? That is not what I am doing; those who think thus are, in my opinion, wrong.» (Note 7) (*EML* 57.7) Seneca more than once disassociated himself from traditional Stoic thought, preserving however a number of cornerstones, based on which he continued to consider himself a Stoic, namely the role of divine providence, conscience, natural law, and virtue. This is the reason why he will be later considered the founder of Neo-Stoicism. For him, «what is death? It is either the end, or a process of change. I have no fear of ceasing to exist; it is the same as not having begun. Nor do I shrink from changing into another state.» (*ibid*. 65.24) And he adds: «what do you think the heavenly light will be when you have seen it in its proper sphere? Such thoughts [...] maintain that the gods are witnesses of everything. They order us to meet the gods' approval, to prepare ourselves to join them at some future time, and to plan for immortality.» (*ibid*. 102.28-29) Although leaving open the possibility of nothingness (the god of philosophers is an unknown God), he indulges again to Platonism when he defines death – just like Christians do – *dies natalis*, so that «that day, which you fear as being the end of all things, is the birthday of your eternity.» (*ibid*. 102.26) It is no coincidence that the first Christian philosopher whose work we still have, Justin, turns out to be a Platonic.

Seneca, furthermore, considers this life a prison, where all are sentenced to death (a theme More will develop in two whole chapters of his second-to-last work: see G. Faro, 2020, 76-78). Thus he writes: «Sooner or later we must all go to the same place. What then? Does he not appear to you the most fearful and foolish of all men who, by great entreaty, asks for a delay of death? Would you not despise a man who, assigned to those about to die, seeks as a favor to be the last to offer his neck?» (*Naturales Quaestiones* 2,59.6)

More will keep this maxim in mind when the Duke of Norfolk warns him about what it means not to acquiesce to the king's will: «*indignatio principis, mors est*» (Pr 16:14). More will answer that he sees, in that case, no big difference between himself and the Duke: «I shall die today, and you tomorrow.» (W. Roper, 1905)

More—who already knows how Seneca's human life will end, although he tactfully and discretely refrains from revealing it to his friend—then asks him what he thinks of suicide. Seneca immediately admits that his two greatest heroes, Socrates and Cato the Younger, both died by suicide. However, for himself, speaking of the infirmity old age inevitably brings, he states: «a great pilot can sail even when his canvas is rent; if his ship be dismantled, he can yet put in trim what remains of her hull and hold her to her course.» (*EML* 30.3)

Therefore, «I shall not abandon old age, if old age preserves me intact for myself, and intact as regards the better part of myself [reason]; but if old age begins to shatter my mind, and to pull its various faculties to pieces, if it leaves me, not life, but only the breath of life, I shall rush out of a house that is crumbling and tottering,» (*ibid*. 58.35) before it is too late to do so; consequently, «I shall not avoid illness by seeking death, as long as the illness is curable and does not impede my soul.» (*ibid*. 58.36) These thoughts should not surprise us. Even for the Utopians described by Thomas More, who for the

most part do not know Christianity and are guided solely by reason, euthanasia is allowed in certain exceptional cases (see *CW* 4, 186). Now, Seneca's works are philosophical writings and, based on reason alone, this is a legitimate thought. Robert Spaemann points out that the authors of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, neo-Marxist Theodore W. Adorno and Max Horckheimer, agree that no legal system can ever fully exclude the killing of a man unless religious considerations intervene (see R. Spaemann, 2000,95). Seneca concludes: «Have I not seen many men break the thread of life? I have indeed seen such men; but those have more weight with me who approach death without any loathing for life, letting death in, so to speak, and not pulling it towards them.» (*EML* 30.15) As is known, Seneca died by suicide, but following his vision of divine providence, or fate, which he encountered in the form of a command by Nero. Tacitus specifies that Nero, after having had him condemned, ordered that his ex-preceptor prepare «should take is own life.» (Tacitus, *Annales* 15.61) (Note 8)

Finally, More tells his friend about his struggle—against the prevailing sexism of his time—to secure for his three daughters and stepdaughter the same humanist education as the one provided to his only son: «man and woman both have the same human nature, which reason differentiates from that of beasts; both, therefore, are equally suited for those studies by which reason is cultivated.» (Rogers, no 62) There were clichés about women even then. More writes to Seneca that if they are to any extent true, «I think woman's intelligence must be even more cultivated, with letters and sciences.» (*ibid.*)

Seneca answers that he finds traditional criticism of the female sex well-founded, unless women are educated in the sciences and virtue (*De constantia sapientis* 14.1). In that case, women can vie with the best of men: «yet who would say that nature has dealt grudgingly with the minds of women, and stunted their virtues? Believe me, they have the same intellectual power as men, and the same capacity for honorable and generous action. If trained to do so, they are just as able to endure sorrow or labor.» (*Consolatio ad Marciam* 16.1)

3. Quick Epilogue

But Seneca must go back to Rome. His brief vacation in the island of Utopia, outside the boundaries of time, is now over. Both friends are worried about their future. Defamatory attacks loom up against them, after their respective resignation from their political offices, celebrated by great praise. From figures such as Nero and Henry VIII anything may be expected. Soon after, each will follow his doom, in his own epoch. Both will be convicted of high treason. For our two heroes, inner freedom comes first and foremost. Seneca reaffirms: «*invulnerabile est non quod non feritur, sed quod non laeditur*,» (*De constantia sapientis* 3.3) which may even be translated into English with another statement of his: «let us strengthen our inner defenses. If the inner part be safe, man can be attacked, but never captured.» (*EML* 74.19) «For my body is the only part of me which can suffer injury. In this dwelling, which is exposed to peril, my soul lives free.» (*ibid*. 65.21)

The best comment to these maxims can be found in the second-to-last letter More wrote to his beloved daughter. Not without a pinch of irony, her father wrote her: «a man may lose his head [it happens to

madmen] and [his soul] have no harm.» (Rogers, no. 206, 589-90)

Unlike More, Seneca used silence in a more pointed belligerent manner, attracting the suspicion of Tigellinus (the new head of the Pretorian guard appointed by Nero). For he wrote:

if Fortune removes you from the front rank, stand your ground nevertheless and cheer on your comrades, and if somebody stops your mouth, stand nevertheless and help your side in silence. The services of a good citizen are never thrown away: he does good by being heard and seen, by his expression, his gestures, his silent determination, and his very walk. (*De tranquillitate animi*, 4).

Nero ordered Seneca to commit suicide (April 19, AD 65). Henry VIII commuted the usual death sentence of traitors – drawing, hanging, and quartering—to a simple beheading for More (6 July 1535). On his way to the gallows, More was to think of his friend's words: «indeed, you must often be just and be at the same time disgraced. And then, if you are wise, let ill repute, well won, be a delight.» (*EML* 113.32). How, then, must one assess the worthiness of a man?

... to know what manner of man he is, look at him when he is naked; make him lay aside his inherited estate, his titles, and the other deceptions of fortune; let him even strip off his body. Consider his soul, its quality and its stature, and thus learn whether its greatness is borrowed, or its own. [...] If a man [...] knows that it makes no difference to him whether his soul takes flight [...] you may call him happy; you may also call him happy if, when he is threatened with bodily torture, whether it be the result of accident or of the might of the stronger, he can without concern hear talk of chains, or of exile, or of all the idle fears that stir men's minds. (*ibid*. 76.32-33)

Both More and Seneca put virtue first. Therefore the author of *Utopia*, who confided foremost in God and not in his own strength, quoted one last thought of Seneca: «No one, I think, rates virtue higher, or is more consecrated to virtue than he who has lost his reputation for being a good man in order to keep from losing the approval of his conscience.» (*ibid*. 81.20)

As prisoner in the Tower of London, More confided to his daughter Margareth: «And therefore as for all the remnant, goods, lands, and life both... I verily trust in God, he shall rather strength me to bear the loss than against this conscience to swear.» (Rogers 206/550-4).

More, who had refused to take the oath to the Acts of Succession and Supremacy, one all English people had to take, or else be tried for high treason, confessed to her: «he that thinketh against the law, neither may swear that law lawfully was made, standing his own conscience to the contrary, nor is bounden upon pain of God's displeasure to change his own conscience therein, for any particular law made anywhere.» (*CM* 206/387–93)

R. Spaemann mentions the case of a Prussian officer who refused to carry out an immoral order. Knowing full well what disobedience implied in the army, he answered: «My life belongs to the King, my honour as soldier does not.» (2000,97) More said he died a loyal subject to the king, but God's first. For Seneca, who compared human life to military service (see *EML* 59.18, and «*vivere, militia est*», Jb 7:1), natural law – which compels in all conscience – comes from God. His philosopher friend, Stoic Musonius Rufus, explicitly stated that one must not obey one's own father, nor magistrates, nor the

emperor himself, should they command immoral actions (*Discourses*, 16). An identical conclusion follows for Seneca and More: «life is not to be purchased at any price.» (*EML* 70.7)

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Notes

Note 1. Here is the passage in which More quotes Seneca: «semper da opera, ne quid invitus facias» (EML 61,3): (always strive not to ever do anything unwillingly), quoted in: Th. More, A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation (CW 12, 254).

Note 2. The moral philosophy of Utopians turns out to be quite close to Seneca's. See Th. More (CW 4,160-2).

Note 3. More was wont to get up at two every night to pray, study, and write his works. A habit he had

probably taken up in the approximately four years he had spent during his youth at the London Charterhouse, sharing – in part – the life of the monks. See R. W. Chambers, Thomas More, London: Cape 1935, 77.

Note 4. More dedicated his most famous work to Dutch humanist Peter Giles. The reflection about sleep taking away half of our life, mentioned by Seneca, is found even in More's Latin Epigrams: «almost half of life is sleep» (CW 3.2/E107). More refers to Aristotle, who in his Nicomachean Ethics (1.13, tr. W. D. Ross) declared: «the happy are not better off than the wretched for half their lives,» referring to the hours of sleep. What is not obvious, though, is that Seneca and More formulate their sentences in a way different from Aristotle and similar instead to each other, with regards to making good use of night-time (despite the sacrifice this involves).

Note 5. Epigrams 109, 205, and 281 are in iambic dimeter, exactly like the ones used only by Seneca in his Thyestes. This was noticed by Bradner and Lynch, in their introduction to the text.

Note 6. In this work death is discussed even with tones that are typical of Seneca.

Note 7. Seneca more than once disassociated himself from traditional Stoic thought, preserving however a number of cornerstones, based on which he continued to consider himself a Stoic, namely the role of divine providence, conscience, natural law, and virtue. This is the reason why he will be later considered the founder of Neo-Stoicism.

Note 8 .Translated into English by John Jackson, in Tacitus, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925-1937), vol. 4, p. 315. There were at least three reasons why Seneca was sentenced. Tacitus wrote that, having had nothing to do with the conspiracy of Calpurnius Piso, Seneca – who had refused to become involved – was accused of failing to denounce it (he knew about it, but failed to report it: Annales, 15.60). From Dio Cassius, one may deduce an incitement to tyrannicide (see Seneca, De Beneficiis, 7,20.3: two conspirators, interrogated by Nero, echoed it in Historia Romana 62,24.1; and in Suetonius, De vitae Caesarum 6,36). I believe a determining factor was that a conspirator admitted, if the plot had succeeded, his intention –along with other conspirators– to immediately overthrow Piso (who Tacitus portrays in sinister tones) to proclaim Seneca emperor, as the most upright man in Rome; the conspirator had declared that Seneca himself was not aware of the plan (see Tacitus, Annales 15,65). Nero tolerated no rivals, whether true or presumed. But Seneca had already warned him that, however much he tried, he would never be able to prevent the rise of his successor (see Dio Cassius, Historia Romana, 61,18.3).