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Cultura Clásica

Senex, segnis, se igni: a Note on Vergil, Georgics 3.95–100 and Aeneid 5.394–396¹

Senex, segnis, se igni: nota a Virgilio, Geórgicas 3.95–100
y Eneida 5.394–396

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Abstract ▪ This paper analyses etymological connections between *senex* and *segnis* as arguably implied in Ti. Claudius Donatus' commentary on *Aen.* 9.610–611 as well as in *Verg. georg.* 3.95–100 and *Aen.* 5.394–396; also explored are linguistic connections between *senex* and *se igni* via *segnis* as possibly suggested in the same Vergilian passages.

Keywords ▪ Vergil; etymology; puns; old age

Resumen ▪ Este artículo analiza conexiones etimológicas entre *senex* y *segnis* posiblemente implícitas en el comentario de Tiberio Claudio Donato a *Aen.* 9.610–611 así como en *Verg. georg.* 3.95–100. y en *Aen.* 5.394–396; también se exploran conexiones lingüísticas entre *senex* y *se igni* (por vía de *segnis*) posiblemente sugeridas en los mismos pasajes virgilianos.

Palabras clave ▪ Virgilio; etimología; juegos verbales; vejez

As N. Adkin observed in 2007, the 1996 edition of J.J. O'Hara's rightly fully praised survey of Vergilian etymologising registers only one passage in which *segnis* is poetically glossed, the etymology at play being *segnis*, 'sluggish' < *sine igni*, 'fireless' (*Aen.* 12.512–526)²: *ac uelut immisi diuersis partibus ignes [...] non segnius ambo / Aeneas Turnusque ruunt*³.

¹ My warmest gratitude to Juan Gil, Bartolomé Pozuelo, Mary Kearns, Daniel Lawrence, Anna Lawrence and the anonymous referees for their alert readings and insightful remarks on the draft of this paper.

² O'Hara 1996: 237 (see nn. 3 and 5 in the present paper); cf. Adkin 2007: 171; on *se igni* as the form of this etymology preferred by Adkin, see n. 4.

³ The pun had been noted by Servius Auctus in commenting upon *Aen.* 12.525 *ergo 'non segnius' ad ignem retulit, quia segnis quasi sine igne sit* (O'Hara 1996, 2017: 237; Adkin

Adkin there expressed his belief that O’Hara’s monograph could be substantially augmented as far as this adjective is concerned, and he accordingly explored other possible instances of *segnis* < *se igni* in Vergil (Adkin 2007)⁴; Adkin’s contribution is noted in the new and expanded edition of O’Hara’s study (2017: xxx)⁵. While I am fully convinced by all of Adkin’s arguments, I also think that O’Hara (2017) may be supplemented with the inclusion of yet another (at the very least, hypothetical) ancient etymology involving *segnis*⁶; if correct, my proposal may be of some additional interest, since the linguistic derivation that will

2007: 171; Casali 2008: 241) and by La Cerda (1617: 732; cf. Casali 2008: 241–243). La Cerda detected the same etymological wordplay in *Aen.* 2.373–375 *festinate, uiri! nam quae tam sera moratur / segnitias? alii rapiunt incensa feruntque / Pergama* (1612: 212; cf. Casali 2008: 245–246); see also Adkin 2007: 171–172, who aptly glosses this pun as ‘Why are you *sine igni*? We’ve set Troy on fire!’ (but see n. 27 in this paper).

- ⁴ Namely, *Aen.* 2.375–377 (see previous n.); 5.172–175; 8.414–415; 9.786–788; 10.689–700; 11.736 (*coll.* 718, 746); 12.566 (*coll.* 573, 576); *georg.* 1.72 (*coll.* 77–78); 3.42–47; 95–100 (on which see below in the present paper). Adkin (2007: 172–173) is inclined to favour *se igni* over *sine igni* as the etymology of *segnis* contemplated by Vergil (*coll.* Paul. Fest. 453.8 Lindsay; *Isid. orig.* 10.247 ‘*segnis*, *id est, sine igni*... ‘*se*’ autem ‘*sine*’ significat); I adhere to this view; furthermore, besides the reasons adduced by Adkin, it may be noted that *se igni* seems phonetically closer to *segnis* than *sine igni*.
- ⁵ Also noted by O’Hara 2017: xxx is Casali 2008; unless otherwise indicated, this is the only edition of O’Hara’s study that will be used from this point on in the present paper.
- ⁶ Or perhaps even with other Vergilian instances of *segnis* < *se igni* such as *Aen.* 8.548–549 *praestantis uirtute legit; pars cetera (sc. sociorum) prona / fertur aqua segnisque secundo defluit amni*. In this much discussed passage, the adjective (‘not the most complimentary of labels for this part of the army’: Fratantuono & Smith 2018: 595) is interpreted by Conington & Nettleship (1963: 138) as meaning ‘without exertion of their own’ (cf. *prona* and *secundo*) and also as perhaps hinting at a ‘faint opposition’ between the *pars cetera* and those allies who, as mentioned in the previous line, were selected by Aeneas to go to the battle against the Etruscans on account of their war-like excellence (*praestantes uirtute*), ‘though it is difficult to justify such an opposition’ (Conington & Nettleship 1963: *ibid.*); additionally, it may be thought that the poet’s insistence on hydrological references (*aqua, amni*) points to an (almost humorous, I would say) etymological pun with *segnis*: it is only natural that this crew is ‘without fire’ amidst so much water!; for discussion and other interpretations, see Fratantuono & Smith 2018: 595–596. In commenting upon *ardentes* (= *ingeniosi*) in Verg. *Aen.* 1.423, Servius writes: *nam per contrarium segnem, id est sine igni, ingenio carentem dicimus: unde et a Graeco uenit catus, id est ingeniosus ἀπό τοῦ καίεσθαι*. Putnam accordingly explains Tib. 1.1.58 *segnis inersque uocer* as an elaborate etymological play on these two adjectives: ‘The speaker who lacks art is also *segnis*, which is to say missing the “fire” that is the mark of the inborn talent complementing creative intelligence. The combination of *segnis* and *iners* therefore makes the surface claim that the speaker lacks the combination of *ars* and *ingenium*, of craftsmanship and imagination, necessary for the production of great poetry’ (Putnam 2005: 126). On *Aen.* 5.394–396, see below; for other non-Vergilian related passages, see nn. 19, 23 and 27 in the present paper.

concern us here is also absent from R. Maltby's immensely important *Lexicon of Ancient Latin Etymologies*⁷.

In a passage also considered by Adkin (2007: 175–176), Vergil provides directions on horses becoming old and therewith inept for procreation (*georg.* 3.95–100)⁸:

95 hunc quoque, ubi aut morbo grauis aut iam segnior annis
deficit, abde domo, nec turpi ignosce senectae.
frigidus in Venerem senior, frustra que laborem
ingratum trahit, et, si quando ad proelia uentum est,
ut quondam in stipulis magnus sine uiribus ignis,
100 incassum furit.

In noticing the accumulation of thermal information (97 *frigidus*; 99 *magnus sine uiribus ignis*), Adkin acutely observes: 'while the young horse in battle possessed *ignis* (85), old age makes him *segnior* (= *se igni*), so that in amatory battles his *ignis* is now *sine uiribus* (99)'. However, the text seems to be more complex in respect of poetic etymologies. Also of note is Vergil's *segnior annis* / [...] *senectus* (ll. 94–95) and Servius Auctus' commentary on these two lines⁹:

duo sunt, quibus minuuntur corporis uires, senectus et morbus: unde mire utrumque complexus est.

As may be seen, although Servius Auctus glosses *segnior annis* by means of *senectus*, thus recognizing the otherwise obvious convergence in meaning between the two expressions, he does not explicitly allege any lexical kinship between *segnior* and *senectus*. However, in his *Interpretationes Vergilianae*, Tiberius Claudius Donatus, writing towards the end of the fourth century AD, seems to have gone one step further in this respect. In commenting on *Aen.* 9.610–611 *nec tarda senectus / debilitat uires* ('and sluggish old age does not weaken my strength'), Claudius Donatus writes¹⁰:

tardam senectutem dixit, non quod tarde ueniat, sed quod faciat homines tardos, hoc est, segnus ad laborem subeundum.

⁷ Maltby 1991: 559; the same can be said of La Cerda 1608, 374–375; Marangoni 2007, Horsfall Scotti 1988, O'Hara 2017, and Adkin's supplements to Maltby 1991 and to Marangoni 2007 (Adkin 2005, 2006, 2008a, 2008b; 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2009d, 2010a, 2010b); as said above, Adkin 2007 is concerned with *segnis* < *se igni*, but not with the possible kinship of this adjective with *senex*.

⁸ The edition of Vergil used throughout is Mynors 1969.

⁹ The edition here used is that of Thilo & Hagen 1887: 284.

¹⁰ The edition here used is that of Georgii 1906: 267.

Again, nowhere is it explicitly said e.g. *senex a segni* or *senectus a segnitie*. However, it may be observed that, after clarifying that *tarda* does not mean here that ‘old age arrives slowly’, but ‘makes men slow’, Claudius Donatus would have had no need to mention *segnis* further: by doing so, and by saying in the vicinity of *senectus* that the former adjective means the latter (cf. *hoc est, segnis*), Claudius Donatus seems to assume — perhaps implying that Vergil too assumed it¹¹ — a lexical kinship between *senex* and *segnis*; also indicative of this may be his use of a syntactic formula, such as the causal clause *quod faciat...segnis*, which is no less common in etymological glosses¹²; all this suggests that, for this interpreter of Vergil, *segnis* was etymologically connected to *senex*. Furthermore, it appears as though Claudius Donatus explained the passage of the *Aeneid* as an instance of a formula frequently used by Vergil and other authors for poetic etymologising, namely that in which the term etymologised or its origin (here *segnis*) is substituted by a synonym or quasi-synonym (here *tarda*) and must be supplied by the reader¹³.

To my knowledge, this is the earliest evidence, however indirect, of this supposed *ueriloquium* in ancient philological sources. However, this fact does not necessarily militate against the view that Vergil might have held the same linguistic notion and poetically alluded to it centuries before. In dealing with verbal learning in the elegies of Tibullus, a major expert on ancient poetic etymologies like F. Cairns has written: ‘just as the reader actively apprehends poetic etymologies, the poet does not merely allude to known etymologies but actively etymologises and sets himself as an independent authority on the subject’¹⁴. Analogously, O’Hara thinks that Vergil possibly points to an etymological connection

¹¹ As O’Hara (2017: 118) observes, some etymologies may have simply been deduced by ancient commentators from no other source than the very text of Vergil; on Vergil considered as an authority on etymologies by later authors of antiquity, see O’Hara 2017: 58 and n. 19 in the present paper.

¹² By definition, a causal clause is a fitting formula for aetiologically explaining the use of a given word based on etymological considerations; other ancient etymologies of the two words at issue may be compared: Paul. Fest. 456.31 Lindsay *segnitia dicitur, quod sit sine nitendo quid utile aut honestum sit* (Maltby 1991: 557); Isid. *diff.* 2.84 *senes... quidam dictos putant, eo quod se nesciunt* (Maltby 1991: 559).

¹³ As in type 3 of Cairns’ classification of Tibullan etymologies (2007: 310): ‘A is derived from C, a (near)-synonym or (near)-antonym of B’; cf. Michalopoulos 2001: 11; see below on *Aen.* 5.394–396; for poetic etymologising as ‘a process demanding active involvement of the reader’, see Cairns 1979: 95. Wordplay by synonym may be deemed as a type of ‘suppression’, a mode of etymological allusion frequently used by Vergil and other Augustan poets (O’Hara 2017: 79–82; Michalopoulos 2001: 3–4).

¹⁴ Cairns 1979: 96; cf. 2007: 309 (cf. nn. 11 and 19 in the present paper).

—unattested in ancient linguistic sources— between *caeruleus* and *caelum* in *Aen.* 3.192–194¹⁵; we may accordingly contemplate the hypothesis of *senex* < *segnis* as being a ‘creative’ etymology suggested by Vergil himself¹⁶. Alternatively, it may be borne in mind that, as O’Hara explains, ‘much later etymologizing does seem conservatively to preserve information and principles from earlier sources’; thus, we might not entirely rule out —although this suggestion must be expressed with all due caution— the possibility that Claudius Donatus perhaps reproduces or echoes an earlier, undocumented lexicological tradition regarding *senex/segnis*¹⁷ which may have been known to Vergil¹⁸.

In fact, instances of wordplay on *senex/segnis* can be discerned among authors contemporary to Vergil or even earlier. In some of these cases, we might not exclude the possibility of simple paronomasia¹⁹. On the other hand, allusion to etymology should not be ruled out in other cases simply on the grounds of the different vowel quantity between *sēnex* and *sēgnis*. As is known, ancient Latin linguists and poets —Vergil

¹⁵ O’Hara 2017: 138; as this author reminds us, *caeruleus* is deemed to probably be cognate with *caelum* in dictionaries like those of Walde-Hofmann or Ernout-Meillet.

¹⁶ The term and concept of ‘creative etymology’ (as opposed to derivations attested in technical sources) are from Cairns 2007: 309 with n. 7.

¹⁷ As a matter of fact, the undeniable coincidence of Claudius Donatus and Servius on, at least, the semantic affinity of *senex* and *segnis* can be best explained by hypothetically invoking the use of a common source by these two scholars, perhaps the lost commentary on Vergil by Aelius Donatus (cf. Murgia 2003: 48; for the problems of relative chronology of the two commentaries, it may here suffice to send the reader to Murgia’s article). This coincidence is not included by Burckas (1888: 18–29) or Squillante Saccone (1985: 34, 58) in their lists of parallels between Claudius Donatus and Servius.

¹⁸ O’Hara (2017: 58) accordingly writes: ‘I have been most confident about suggesting that Vergil is etymologizing when the words thus linked have been connected by another source’ (notice that O’Hara is not chronologically specific about this complementary source); see above and n. 15 in the present paper. On the same issue, cf. Cairns 1979: 95–96; 2007: 309: ‘the lack of attestation for any particular suggested etymology may always be due to an accident of non-survival’.

¹⁹ Cf. perhaps Ter. *Andr.* 206–207 *Enim uero, Daue, nil locist segnitiae neque socordiae, / quantum intellexi modo senis sententiam de nuptiis*; Liv. 30.21.6 *Mentio deinde ab senioribus facta est segnius homines bona quam mala sentire*; Lucan. 8.296–7 *nec puer aut senior letalis tendere neruos / segnis, et a nulla mors est incerta sagitta*; Tac. *ann.* 4.59.3 *patientiam senis et segnitiam iuuenis iuxta insultet*. On paronomasia in Vergil, see O’Hara 2017: 60–63. This author observes that in some cases ‘words juxtaposed by Vergil simply for assonance or other reasons may have seemed to later authors –in particular Servius, Isidore or their sources– to have been connected etymologically because they are juxtaposed by Vergil, who was thought by some in late antiquity to have mastered all human knowledge’ (O’Hara 2017: 58; see above and n. 11 in the present paper).

among them— seem to have been willing to ignore such prosodic discrepancies when similarity of sound and affinity of meaning invited an etymological connection²⁰. The lines of the *Georgics* quoted above help corroborate this perception, as there is further indication here of Vergil's deliberate allusion to the lexical derivation arguably suggested by Donatus. Vertical juxtaposition of words connected etymologically at beginnings of ends of consecutive lines is one of the formal devices typically used by Vergil, as well as by other poets, for signposting an etymological pun in progress²¹. If we may speak of 'vertical juxtaposition' regarding *segnior (annis) / ...senectae*²², it will then be legitimate to consider this word-arrangement as perhaps intended by the poet to indicate the etymological relationship between *segnis* and *senex*. By the same token, it is also legitimate to suspect that the assonance between *segnior* and *senior* (l. 102) goes beyond the realm of simple, ornamental paronomasia, and aims to suggest the same linguistic notion²³.

20 See O'Hara 2017: 61–62 and n. 317 for discussion and examples from Vergil, Varro and other Latin authors.

21 Cf. Nemes. ecl. 1.49–50 *Heu, Meliboeae, iaces letali frigore segnis / lege hominum, caelo dignus canente senecta* (for another pun on *segnis* – *senex* by the same author, see n. 23 in this paper; on the possible chain of etymologies *se igni* (= *frigore*) > *segnis* > *senex*, cf. below and n. 27). As Weber (1990: 212) already observed, 'it is altogether in Vergil's manner [...] to juxtapose related words vertically' (see *ibid.* his remarks on *Aen.* 4.81–82); on 'vertical juxtaposition' as an etymological marker, see Maltby 1993: 269–270, 272; Michalopoulos 1999: 131, n. 18; Michalopoulos 2001: 5 with n. 22; O'Hara 2017: 86–88; see next n.

22 And I think we may, despite the fact that *segnior* is not the last word of line 96. In the examples of 'vertical juxtaposition' identified by O'Hara in pp. 86–88 of his monograph, the two key-terms appear at the very end and / or at the very beginning of the lines containing them. However, other poets seem to provide instances of this device in which one of the two words is placed in quasi-final position: cf. Tib. 1.7.17–20 *...turribus aequor / ... docta Tyros* (Cairns 2007: 319); in Lucr. 2.611–613 *...matrem Phrygiasque catervas [...] fruges coepisse creari*, the two words allegedly involved in the etymological pun (Cairns 2007: 326) occupy a similar, but not identical, position inside the hexameter. The same may be said of Stat. *silu.* 5.4.12–13 *quae sacer alterna... / Argus et haud umquam* (cf. Mulligan 2011: 471–472).

23 The following passages may also be considered here: *epiced. Drusi.* 446–448 *acta senem faciunt: haec numeranda tibi, / his aeuum fuit implendum, non segnibus annis: / hostibus eueniat longa senecta meis*; Val. Fl. 6.308–130 *genitor, turpi durare senecta / quem mihi reris adhuc, ipse hac occumbere dextra / maluit atque ultro segnes abrumpere metas*; Stat. *silu.* 5.3.26 *Maeonium Ascraeumque senem non segnior umbra* and 258 *nec segnis labe senili*; Gibson (2006: 277) rightly observes that Statius puns on *senior* – *segnior*; this scholar also quotes the etymology *segnis* < *sine igni, ingenio carens* (on which see n. 6 in the present paper), but does not consider the derivation *senex* < *segnis*; Nemes. *cyn.* 117–118 *Namque graues morbi subeunt segnisque senectus / inualidamque dabunt non firmo robore prolem* (probably an imitation of Verg. *georg.* 3.95f.: Nemesianus' theme is the breeding

One final hypothesis should be considered. It may be remembered that ‘clustering’ has been defined by O’Hara as a ‘typical feature of Vergilian etymological wordplay’ by which ‘the poet gives or alludes to the etymologies of several words, usually proper names, within a short passage’ (2017: 60). This category may be applied to the present case: though not proper names, two different words (*segnis* and *senex*) are seemingly glossed within the span of three lines. However, not merely a cluster but a chain of two etymologies can be said to be at play in *georg.* 3.95–100, namely *senex* < *segnis* and *segnis* < *se igni*²⁴. This obviously implies the notion that *senex* could have been thought of by Vergil as ultimately derived from *se igni*. However, nowhere in ancient sources have I found an explicit indication of such an etymology; was this derivation ‘creatively’ suggested by the poet himself? (see above and n. 16). In any case, it may safely be argued that readers of Vergil are meant to perceive *senex* and *se igni* as, to some extent, linguistically connected by means of *segnis*. And perhaps not only in the passage from *Georgics*. Compare *Aen.* 5.394–396, where the aged Entellus speaks:

‘non laudis amor nec gloria cessit
395 pulsa metu; sed enim gelidus tardante senecta
 sanguis hebet, frigentque effetae in corpore uires [...]’.

The reason for Entellus’ hematological condition is expressed by the absolute ablative enclosed in *gelidus...sanguis*: his *senecta* makes his blood *tarda*, that is, *segnis* (see above on *Aen.* 9.610–611); and again, the etymology of this adjective (*se igni*) may be recalled in the vicinity of *gelidus* and *frigent* (see above Adkin’s remarks on *segnior*, *frigidus* and *magnus sine uiribus ignis* in *georg.* 3.95–100). But there is perhaps more to it. As it happens, in ancient medical thought ageing was seen as a cooling physical process, and this notion recurs in philosophical and general literature²⁵: *Aen.* 5.394–396 is a good example, and *georg.* 3.95–100 may be also considered as such²⁶. One cannot then help wonder

of hunting dogs; cf. perhaps Curt. 8.9.32 *uiuos se cremari iubent quibus aut segnis aetas aut incommoda ualitudo est; [...] nec ullus corporibus quae senecta soluit honos redditur: inquinari putant ignem, nisi qui spirantes recipit*); Sidon. *carm.* 2.327 *segnior incedit senio*.

²⁴ A comparable case may perhaps be found in Catull. 34.17–18 *cursu...menstruo / metiens iter annuum*, where Zetzel (1988: 81) sees ‘a set of etymological links between *messis* and *mensis*, *metior* and *meto*’ (on which see more in Michalopoulos 1999: 143; cf. O’Hara 2017: 263 on Verg. *georg.* 1.353 *menstrua luna*).

²⁵ Parkin 2003: 251–253; 420, n. 52.

²⁶ Parkin (2003: 252) actually uses this very passage from the *Aeneid* in order to illustrate the ancient conception that ‘what blood the aged does have is icy cold’. Grantedly, no

whether, in these Vergilian passages, the alleged etymological puns on *senex* < *segnis* < *se igni* are meant to provide a linguistic counterpart to that physiological conception, thereby suggesting that the very *nomen* of old age is, ultimately, a true *omen* of a cold age²⁷.

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mention of blood is made regarding the *segnior* horse in *georg.* 3.95ff., but this animal's *frigiditas* and the lack of *uires* of its sexual 'fire' could be thought, from the poet's outlook, to reflect the same aetiology as in the case of Entellus (*frigentque effetae in corpore uires*).

²⁷ From this perspective, in *Aen.* 2.373–375 *sera...segnities* might be felt to suggest not only 'why are you *sine igni*?' (as opposed to *incensa Pergama*, according to Adkin's gloss; see n. 3 in the present paper), but also 'why are you sluggish as if you were *senes*?' (as opposed to *festinate, uiri!*). Clear reminiscences of the passage from the *Georgics* may be found in *Sil.* 5.570–573 *uani frigentem in Marte senectam / prodebant ictus; stipula crepitabat inani / ignis iners cassamque dabat sine robore flammam* (cf. La Cerda 1608: 375); for the *Aeneid* passage, cf. Ambr. *expos. psalm.* 117.11.11 (p. 430 Petschenig) *Praecurrat aetatis maturitatem, quisquis in adulescentia positus senilem grauitatem induit et iuuenales annos ueterana quadam continentia regit feruoremque uirentis corporis incana morum maturitate componit. nam quid potest habere laudis, si effatum corpus uoluptatibus et iam senectutis gelu frigidum ad sera deuotionis officia deposito iam segnior uigore conuertat?*; compare also Claud. *carm. min.* 27.36–37 *Iam breue decrescit lumen languetque senili / segnis stella gelu.*

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