1985

Georgic 3.41: A Vergilian Wordplay at the Expense of Maecenas

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Recommended Citation

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VERGILIAN WORD-PLAY
AT THE EXPENSE OF MAECENAS

Vergil mentions Maecenas by name in the opening lines of each book of the Georgics (1.2, 2.41, 3.41, and 4.2). While there may or may not be some special significance to the symmetrical positioning of the name, it seems likely that at least in one of the instances Vergil is making a word-play whose purpose it is to poke some good-natured fun at the personality of his dedicatee. At lines 3.40-41, in which the poet places his sylvan subject in apposition with the “commands” of his patron, he says:

interea Dryadum silvas saltusque sequamur intactos, tua, Maecenas, haud mollia iussa.

The humor, as this note aims to show, resides in the juxtaposition of Maecenas’ name with the phrase haud mollia iussa. On the surface, of course, the words mean “commands which are not easy.” However, another level of meaning is possible if we recall that mollis can also mean “effeminate” or “unmanly.” Vergil uses it in this sense in Georgic 1.57, molles Sabaei. There is irony in Vergil calling his patron’s commands haud mollia because both in the eyes of his contemporaries and in the memory of succeeding generations Maecenas was both the embodiment and exemplum of mollitia.

That this was a salient feature of Maecenas’ public persona is attested to by many an ancient writer. Here for example, is Seneca’s portrait of him during the crisis of civil war (Ep. 114.6):

non statim cum haec legeris hoc tibi occurrerit, hunc esse qui solutis tunicis in urbe semper incesserit (nam etiam cum absentis Caesaris partibus fungeretur, signum a discincto petebatur); hunc esse qui in tribunali, in rostri, in omni publico coetu sic apparuerit ut pallio velaretur caput exclusis utrimque auribus, non aliter quam in mimo fugitivi divitis solent; hunc esse qui tunc maxime civilibus bellis strepentibus et sollicita urbe et armata comitatus hic fuerit in publico, spadones duo, magis tamen virum quam ipse.

75.26 [Artemis]; Hy. 3.226 [Artemis]; Hy. 2.13 τοῦ προστατεύου... ἐπιδημῆσαιος; here motion seems certain despite the scholiast, who simply misreads the passage. Callimachus uses the aorist, which implies change. One non-literary use is SIG 1169.85: τοῦ θεοῦ (sc. Άκλεπτίου) ὅσι ἐπιδημῶσας αὐτῷ ἀλλ' ἐὰν ἰπτανῶν κατος.

That ingredi means “to go in,” as opposed to “to come in,” further explains why it is not invocatory. The temple is therefore not where the caller is situated. If it weren’t for the immediacy of this call for epiphany, one might suggest that the temple is the future one in Mantua (Geo. 3.16).

We see, then, that Royds’ (above, note 14) “take thy throne,” however fortuitously, comes closest to the rendering I am suggesting. Cf. Merguet’s “betreten” (above, note 3).

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Further in this same letter, as Seneca argues the connection between Maecenas' decadent lifestyle with his effete writing style, he says (8): *apparet enim mollem fuisse, non mitem.* A similar characterization is to be found in Velleius whose description of Maecenas is (2.88.2): *otio ac mollitis paene ultra feminam fluens.* In fact, ancient authors have left us copious references to this aspect of Maecenas' personality as evidenced in his dining habits (Pliny, *HN.* 8.170), his outrageous clothing (Juvenal 12.39), his entourage (Seneca, *Ep.* 114.6: Horace, *Sat.* 2.8), and his questionable liaison with the *pantomimus* Bathyllus (Tacitus, *Ann.* 1.54; Dio 54.17.5). Even Augustus himself was astonished at the extremes of Maecenas' foppery and derided him for his *mopopeyeok concimnos* (Suetonius, *Aug.* 86).

Vergil's playfulness both with the names and personalities of his contemporaries as well as his more serious interest in etymology is well known. J. J. H. Savage has pointed out how in *Eclogue* 3 Vergil is probably punning on the name of Pollio (*polleo*) in lines 84-88 and on the name of Aemilius Macer in line 100: *beu, beu quam pingui macer est mibi taurus in erro.* More recently, Carl Springer writing about the same *Eclogue* has observed *paranomasia* in the word *arator* and the name Aratus. While not exactly a case of paranomasia the placement of the name of Maecenas directly before the phrase *baud mollia iussa* does represent another instance of the playful Vergil here making an ingenious word choice in order to make a joke at the expense of his patron.

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NOTES

1 L. P. Wilkinson, *The Georgics of Virgil* (Cambridge 1969) 321, notes the symmetry but sees no readily discernible purpose behind it, while M. Putnam, *Virgil's Poem of the Earth. Studien in the Georgics* (Princeton 1979) 18, sees the name as "an ordering principle...a spirit of coalescence, imposed as intellectual pattern on materials often chaotic and returning us finally whence we started." See also F. Klingner, *Virgil Bucolica, Georgica, Aeneis* (Zurich 1967) 281-282.

2 P. Van de Woestijne, "*Haud mollia iussa,*" *RBPh* (1929) 523-530, argues against the notion of a command from Maecenas but rather speaks of Vergil's spontaneous inspiration.

3 See the entry for "mollis" in the OLD, especially sections 13 and 15.


