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Georgic 3.41: A Vergilian Wordplay at the Expense of Maecenas

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75.26 [Artemis]; *Hy.* 3.226 [Artemis]; *Hy.* 2.13 τοῦ Φοῖβου . . . ἐπιδημήσαντος; 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*³ 1169.85: τοῦ θεοῦ (sc. Ἀσκληπίου) οὐκ ἐπιδαμοῦτος αὐτοῦ ἀλλ' ἐν Ἐπιδαύρῳ ἐόντος.

²¹ 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).

²² 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).

GEORGIC 3.41: A 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,¹ 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,² 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.”³ 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.⁴ 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 occurret, 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 rostris, in omni publico coetu sic apparuerit ut pallio velaretur caput exclusis utrimque auribus, non aliter quam in mimo fugitivi divitis solent; hunc esse cui tunc maxime civilibus bellis strepitibus et sollicita urbe et armata comitatus hic fuerit in publico, spadones duo, magis tamen viri quam ipse.

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 mollitiis 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).⁵ Even Augustus himself was astonished at the extremes of Maecenas' foppery and derided him for his *μυροβρεχεῖς concinnos* (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.⁶ 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: *heu, heu quam pingui macer est mihi taurus in ervo*.⁷ More recently, Carl Springer writing about the same *Eclogue* has observed *paranomasia* in the word *arator* and the name Aratus.⁸ While not exactly a case of *paranomasia* the placement of the name of Maecenas directly before the phrase *haud 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

¹L. 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. Studies 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.

²P. 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.

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

⁴For an exhaustive compendium of ancient references to Maecenas' *vitia* see J. E. B. Mayor, *Thirteen Satires of Juvenal* (London 1901) I, pp. 114-115, reprinted by Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung (Hildesheim 1966).

⁵See R. Avallone, *Mecenatē* (Naples 1963). For Maecenas' role in the Augustan dispensation see R. Syme, *The Roman Revolution* (Oxford 1939).

⁶For a good bibliographical reference on the subject of Vergil's etymologizing see R. B. Egan, "Arms and Etymology in *Aeneid* 11," *Vergilius* 29 (1983) 19-26, note 1.

⁷J. J. H. Savage, "The Art of the Third *Eclogue* of Vergil (55-111)," *TAPA* 89 (1958) 142-158.

⁸C. Springer, "Aratus and the Cups of Menalcas: A Note on *Eclogue* 3.42," *CJ* 79 (1983-84) 131-134.