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Recommended Citation

Makowski, JF. "Iocusus Maecenas: patron as writer" in *Syllecta Classica* 3, 1991.

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Iococus Maecenas: Patron As Writer

John F. Makowski

Maecenas as discoverer and supporter of the literary luminaries of his day achieved a name virtually synonymous with patronage. Less well known, however, even to many students of Augustan literature is Maecenas, prose stylist and poet. Explicably, the obscurity of his reputation as a writer is due in large part to the failure of most of his writing to survive, but fortunately the handful of fragments still extant is enough to afford an intriguing glimpse into one of the most colorful and contradictory figures of the Augustan Age.¹ Though scanty, the nine fragments of prose and eight of poetry provide a coherent picture of Maecenas' literary output, and several are of importance to students of Vergil and Horace because they reveal the mutual influence from patron to poet and poet to patron. Furthermore, interesting as the fragments are in themselves, they are also valuable for the judgments passed upon them by Maecenas' own contemporaries and by ancient literary critics. Thus, the comments of contemporaries like Agrippa, Horace, and Augustus and the considered judgments of Seneca, Quintilian, and Tacitus form a significant page in the history of Roman literary criticism. This paper, besides aiming to provide an introduction to the fragments of Maecenas, will also suggest that many of the quotations, though dissected by grammarians and philologists into their syntactical and lexical components, stand in need of further illumination as to their tone and purpose. It will be argued that Maecenas' language, admittedly vexing and obscure, is in the main such because of the author's intentional efforts at humor and, in several instances, at self-parody.

The fragments themselves and the *testimonia* of commentators attest that Maecenas worked in a number of genres both in prose and in verse. In these

¹ The most important recent studies of Maecenas as *littérateur* are: R. Avallone, *Mecenate* (Naples 1962), which incorporates the author's previous studies of Maecenas as well as discussions of other much earlier research; J.-M. André, *Mécène. Essai de biographie spirituelle* (Paris 1967), much of which material is reproduced and expanded in "Mécène écrivain (avec en appendice, les fragments de Mécène)," *ANRW* II 30.3 (1983) 1765-87. [This study will cite the former as "André, *Mécène*" and the latter as "André, *Mécène écrivain*."] Earlier studies with still useful discussion include E. Norden, *Die antike Kunstprosa*, vol. 1 (Leipzig and Berlin 1909=5th edition Darmstadt 1958) 290-94; P. Lunderstedt, *De Maecenatis Fragmentis* (Leipzig 1911); A. Kappelmacher, "Maecenas" in *RE* XIV (1928); A. Fournies, *Mécène* (Brussels 1947); and H. Bardon, *La littérature latine inconnue*, vol. 2 (Paris 1956) 13-19.

fragments are discernible not only his extensive familiarity with the Graeco-Roman literary traditions antecedent to the Augustan age but also the influences at play in his own writings.² In prose, for example, he authored a *Prometheus*, which seems to have been a Menippean satire modelled upon Varro, and according to Servius, a *Symposium*, a dialogue in the Platonic mode, featuring among the symposiasts Vergil, Horace, and Messala. In addition, he wrote an autobiographical work entitled *De Cultu Suo* and an *In Octaviam*, which may have been (certainty is impossible), an elogium on the sister of Augustus.³ This versatility in a wide range of prose genres finds parallel in Maecenas' poetic endeavors, the tantalizing remains of which demonstrate skill in handling a variety of meters (hexameters, galliambics, hendecasyllables) as well as a variety of themes: addresses to protégés like Horace, poems of friendship in imitation of Catullus, musings on mortality, and perhaps even an epic.⁴

A natural starting point for a consideration of Maecenas *scriptor* is Seneca's *Moral Epistle* 114 not only because it is our major source for prose fragments (all from the *De cultu suo*), but also because Seneca uses these very quotations for a double purpose: first, for a disquisition on literary criticism and, secondly, for an assessment of Maecenas the man. The theme of the letter is the inextricable link between a man's morals and his writing style: "talīs hominibus fuit oratio qualis vita" (1); life and prose style will necessarily mirror each other, and specifically, a decadent writing style will necessarily bespeak a decadent character. As the most egregious proof of his thesis Seneca adduces Maecenas, whose morals and personal habits are made to serve as a parallel for his writing style. Seneca's attack begins with:

quomodo Maecenas vixerit notius est quam ut narrari nunc debeat quomodo ambulaverit, quam delicatus fuerit, quam cupierit videri, quam vitia sua latere noluerit. Quid ergo? non oratio eius aequae soluta est quam ipse discinctus? non tam insignita illius verba sunt quam cultus, quam comitatus, quam domus, quam uxor? magni vir ingenii fuerat, si illud egisset via rectiore, si non vitasset intellegi, si non etiam in oratione difflueret. (Ep. 114.4)

For Seneca Maecenas represents the embodiment of that most un-Roman of vices, *mollitia*, effeminacy or softness, and in Maecenas' case a vice so pervasive that it taints his morals, *toilette*, entourage, household, and marriage. Although Seneca's reasons for his merciless caricature of Maecenas are unclear, the charges he levels find echoes in many an ancient writer including Velleius Paterculus, Juvenal, Pliny, and Tacitus.⁵ The key words in Seneca's diatribe are *discinctus* and *solutus*, the

² Servius *ad Verg.* G. 2.41 says "Maecenatem fuisse litterarum peritum et plura composuisse carmina." This, of course, echoes Horace *Ode* 3.8.5: "docte sermones utriusque linguae."

³ It may be that the *De cultu suo* was a personal apologia akin in genre to Marc Antony's *De ebrietate sua*. From the *In Octaviam* a sole quotation survives, preserved by Priscianus, *Inst.* 10 (*Gramm. Lat.* II 356, 6-7 Keil): "pexisti capillum naturae muneribus gratum." Kappelmacher (above, note 1, 219) notes the vulgar perfect form of the verb used in place of *pexisti*, while Bardon (above, note 1, 17) sees the quotation as indicative of Maecenas' obsessive interest in matters of personal grooming.

⁴ Servius *ad Verg.* G. 2.42 attests that Maecenas wrote an epic; also Horace's words at *Ode* 2.12.9-12 (*tuque pedestribus / dices historis proelia Caesaris, / Maecenas*) have been taken to support this view. Modern scholarship is not convinced. See Avallone (above, note 1) 124-26.

⁵ Seneca's especial hostility to Maecenas has been variously explained. Roland Mayer ("Neronian Classicism," *AJP* 103 [1982] 305-18) thinks that Maecenas' works may just have been published shortly before the composition of Seneca's letters and speculates that Seneca may have viewed himself as literary patron in emulation rather than in imitation of Maecenas. Avallone

image being that of an unmanly looseness in dress that finds its mirror in looseness of style. The climax of the tirade is Seneca's vignette, one worthy of Juvenal, of Maecenas' antics on the eve of the civil war, when while all Rome was hanging in suspense, awaiting the end of the world, an unfazed Maecenas paraded himself through the metropolis in women's clothes in the company of two eunuchs who were more men than their master (6)!

The attack moves from the sartorial to the stylistic as Seneca charges *mollitia* in the realm of diction and style. Maecenas' *vitia*, as Seneca sees them, are:

haec verba tam improbe structa, tam neglegenter abiecta, tam contra
 consuetudinem omnium posita ostendunt mores quoque non minus novos et
 pravos et singulares fuisse. . . . hoc istae ambages compositionis, hoc verba
 transversa hoc sensus miri, magni quidem saepe, sed enervati dum exeunt, cuius
 manifestum facient: motum illi felicitate nimia caput. (7-8)

For Seneca the hallmarks of literary *mollitia* are willful obscurantism, syntactic liberties, eccentric word-order, neologisms, self-indulgent preciousness, and deviations from the norms of standard Latinity, all of it apparently motivated by an exhibitionistic desire to, as it were, *épater la bourgeoisie*.⁶ Notable, however, is the grudging admission that Maecenas at least had the potential for producing something great and admirable, but in the end stands Seneca's summation of a boozy, wandering eloquence full of self-indulgence, *eloquentia ebria* and *oratio portentosissima*.

Heading the catalogue of Maecenetan *mala exempla* is the question (5): "quid turpius 'amne silvisque ripa comantibus.'" "What is more disgusting than 'a river and woods on the bank sprouting tresses?'" As Seneca quotes it, the line with its string of ablatives is at first sight puzzling, but the original form of the quotation must have been "amnis silvaeque ripa comantur" or perhaps "amnis silvaeque ripa comari videntur."⁷ Even so, immediately obvious in the sentence are a number of anomalies in syntax and content. First, the word *comantur* is a *hapax legomenon* and,

(above, note 1, 136 n. 5) thinks Seneca's quarrel with Maecenas had many levels and terms it a "vendetta di grande scrittore contro il mediocre dilettante, di stoico contro l'epicureo, di sfortunato ministro di Nerone contro il fortunato ministro di Augusto." D. Gagliardi ("Quintiliano e Seneca. Una nota di lettura," *RFIC* 90 [1982] 78-79) posits that Seneca's judgment, like Quintilian's, is based on aesthetics and attributes his harsh judgment to differences in taste for styles of prose.

Among the ancients moral outrage was not the universal reaction to Maecenas' foppery. There were those whose reaction was humor, among them Augustus, who quipped about his minister's *myrobrechis concinnos* (Suet. *Aug.* 86), and Horace who could smile at his patron's entourage (*Sat.* 2.8) and even make an allusion to the scandalous liaison with Bathyllus. For a similar poetic reaction on the part of Vergil, see J.F. Makowski, "Georgic 3.41: A Vergilian Word-Play at the Expense of Maecenas," *Vergilius* 31 (1985) 57-58. Still, on the other side, of course, stood Agrippa, who in the words of Ronald Syme (*The Roman Revolution* [Oxford 1939] 341-42): "loathed the effeminate and sinister descendant of Etruscan kings who flaunted in public the luxury and the vices in which his tortured inconstant soul found refuge—silks, gems, and the ambiguous charms of the actor Bathyllus; he despised the vile epicure who sought to introduce a novel delicacy to the banquets of Rome, the flesh of young donkeys." If it is true (cf. Zonaras 10.34) that Maecenas advised Augustus that his alternatives concerning Agrippa were limited to execution or to marriage with Julia, Agrippa's hostility was grounded in more than matters of personal taste. See also J. Griffin, *Latin Poets and Roman Life* (London 1985) 13 and 25-26.

⁶ Seneca's criticism of Maecenas echoes what was said of Ovid's own writing: "non ignoravit sua vitia sed amavit" (Sen. *Controv.* 2.2.12). For a discussion of Seneca's rhetorical theory in *Ep.* 114, see G. Kennedy, *The Art of Rhetoric in the Roman World* (Princeton 1972) 477-81.

⁷ This is the suggestion of Avallone (above, note 1) 231.

apparently, one of Maecenas' own coining. For while the adjective *comans* meaning "hairy" or "leafy" is common in Latin, the verb form *comari* is a novelty. We see here a trademark of Maecenas' style, a fondness for neologisms, especially the coinage of deponent verbs of the first conjugation. Another feature unusual for prose is the omission of the preposition *in* before *ripa*, causing the reader to puzzle as to the case of the noun and as to whether *ripa* refers to both *amnis* and *silvae* or only to the latter alone. In other words, is the word *comantibus* made to serve a double function, describing simultaneously the woods with their literal foliage and then the river with its reflected foliage? This is an ambiguity perhaps welcome in the realm of poetry, but in prose it may well substantiate Seneca's charge of *ambages compositionis*.⁸

Seneca next bids the reader: "vide ut 'alveum lintribus arent versoque vado remittant hortos.'" "See how 'they [sc. the oarsmen] plow the channel with boats and with shoal upturned push back the gardens.'" Since Seneca offers no specifics of analysis, we can only surmise what features of style or syntax so offend him. It has been suggested that *vertere*, normally used of soil, is unusual here in its application to water, but such usage has parallel in other writers. A more tangible difficulty may be the ambiguity of the case of *vado*, which might at first sight be taken to be a nonsensical dative with *remittant*, then proving to be an ablative absolute—in Senecan terms, "verba neglegenter abiecta, contra consuetudinem posita." A more serious problem lies in the phraseology of the men on the water who "send back" or "push back" gardens, when, in fact, it is the gardens that are receding from the men. Defenders of the image often cite a parallel to Vergil's *Aeneid* 3.72 (*provehimur portu terraeque urbesque recedunt*), but it is clear that Maecenas' usage of *remittere* is a much bolder manipulation of language and an illogical inversion of an optic phenomenon.

A line follows that often makes even apologists for Maecenas concur with Seneca's censure: "si quis 'feminae cinno crispat et labris columbatur incipitque suspirans, ut cervice lassa fanantur nemoris tyranni.'" The quotation has perplexed many, and with good reason. For one thing, the sentence contains three *hapax legomena* (*cinno*, *columbatur*, *fanantur*), two of them yet again neologistic deponent verbs of the first declension. The case of *feminae* is ambiguous, dative according to some, genitive to others.⁹ *Cinnus* is a rare word, probably denoting some sort of facial expression, a wink or a nod, on the part of the *femina*.¹⁰ *Columbatur* from *columba* must mean to act like a dove, that is, to bill and coo, while *fanantur* (related to *fanaticus*) denotes some wild or bestial behavior. The quotation then describes the reaction of a man to the look of a *meretrix* or *lupa*, the customer being compared to the tyrants of the forest, who have variously been interpreted to be forest animals or the Galli, the fanatical eunuch priests of Cybele.¹¹ My (intentionally tortured) rendering is: "at the wink of the wench he starts a-quivering and with his lips he gets all lovey-dovey and begins heavy breathing, just as with drooping neck they go

⁸ The line has both its detractors and admirers. Kappelmacher (above, note 1, 222) besides analyzing the line as words *contra consuetudinem posita* also notes that the rhythm is unusual for prose. Avallone (above, note 1, 230-34) judges the line a success and, as for the ambiguity of whether the foliage is real or reflected, cites a parallel in *Aeneid* 8.94-96. Even so it is undeniable that Maecenas' level of ambiguity is well beyond that of Vergil.

⁹ Kappelmacher (above, note 1, 221) takes it to be dative, Avallone (above note 1, 239) genitive. The former also notes that the use of a bacchic-molossian rhythm in a prose sentence is odd.

¹⁰ On *cinnus* the TLL, citing Fulgentius, says: "nictare dicimus cinnum facere."

¹¹ The various possibilities will be found under the entry for *fanor* in the TLL.

berserk, the tyrants of the forest."¹² What, we may ask, is the tone of the passage? Even though the sentence is studded with neologisms, even though exact meanings and referents are open to question and the reconstruction of a context impossible, one thing is unmistakable: the sentence with its playful and Plautine mangling of language must be comical or satiric. As a one-line description of a whore and her "john," the sentence stands as a success. As for an evaluation of the content, neither ancient moralist nor modern philologist need be outraged at either the stylistic or moral looseness of these words. The sentence is a signal that when dealing with Maecenas the reader should come equipped with a sense of humor and be aware of the possibility that some and perhaps most of the extant quotations originally were intended to elicit laughter. On this point, Horace's *Odes*, *Epodes*, and *Satires* are a constant reminder that the patron who made them possible was himself a thoroughly *iocosus Maecenas* (*Epode* 3.20).

Seneca's next quotation takes us into yet another fantastical conceit: "inremediabilis factio rimantur epulis lagonaque temptant domos et spe mortem exigunt." The loss of the quotation's context makes both the punctuation and meaning of the line problematical. Two explanations have been offered for the identity of the *inremediabilis factio*, the one traditional and accepted by most scholars and one recent—and to this author plausible—advanced by Heurgon.¹³ Traditionally, the sentence has been taken as referring to *delatores*, "an irremediable lot who rummage through banquets and with wine-bottle assail homes and by means of hope exact death." Understood this way, the lines exhibit stylistic boldness in a number of ways: the adjective *inremediabilis* is rare,¹⁴ while the sentence's opening words suggest the literal action of rummaging for food and drink but then take on a metaphorical meaning in that the banquets are only the "occasion" for *delatores* to hunt out victims. Also, the next image suggests the physical action of hurling a bottle as a weapon against houses but then turns into an elaborate conceit again for the action of *delatio*, with the *domos* standing for *dominos*.¹⁵ This is a difficult explanation of a difficult line. A much simpler interpretation is that of Heurgon who argues that the *factio* is not *delatores* but rather ghosts or Manes, who haunt ritual funerary banquets such as those of the Lemuria. His rereading involves a repunctuation of the text: "rimantur epulis lagonaque, temptant domos et spe mortem exigunt." This solves the problem of *lagona*, as the description then is that of ghosts hungry and thirsty poking through banquet and wine bottle;¹⁶ *temptant domos* is self-

12 Avallone (above, note 1, 240) offers two alternate translations: "E che? se qualcuno 'al cenno di una mala femmina strizza l'occhio e colombeggia con le labbra e comincia sospirando, come, stanco il collo, infuriano i tiranni della foresta (cioè le fiere)" and as the less preferred alternate, "se qualcuno scherza coi riccioli di una donna e colombeggia con le labbra e comincia sospirando, perchè i tiranni della selva infuriino con il collo stanco." In addition to the quotation's eccentricities already noted by Avallone and others, there may be several others, for example, the incongruity of the etymology of *columbatum* set along side the imagery of forest animal and perhaps an even greater incongruity if the oversexed subject of the sentence is indeed being compared to *Galli*; furthermore, the simile contains the disjuncture of number as a man (singular) is compared to other creatures (plural), while the *ut* clause raises the possibility of a purpose clause only to be followed by a verb whose meaning, mood, and even conjugation are in question.

13 M.J. Heurgon under the *compte-rendu des séances* of REL 39 (1961) 49-51.

14 Again, defenders of the neologism cite Vergil.

15 Avallone (above, note 1, 242-43) finds the quotation a successful evocation of the devious ways of the *delatores*.

16 This solution has the further neatness in obviating a problem with the plural *epulae* and the singular *lagona*.

explanatory, while *mortem exigunt* is explained as a clever *para prosdokian* playing on the phrase *vitam exigunt* and one particularly apt for Manes. Accordingly, the line rendered in English (neologism and all) might be: "an unmedicable lot they [sc. the Manes] poke through the banquet and the wine bottle, they make trial of houses and spend their death in hope." Although the subject is funereal, it would not be implausible to see humor in the inverted expression of ghosts spending their death in the way the living spend their lives. In the end, no matter what the interpretation, Maecenas' boldness in language is undeniable, and whether describing *delatores* or Manes, the words exert a macabre, and perhaps funny, effectiveness.¹⁷ It will be seen below that on the subject of death Maecenas was not above black comedy in at least two other fragments.

For Seneca Maecenas is no laughing matter but rather a torturer of the Latin language fashioning his words, as it were, on a veritable rack (*eculeus*). Thus in *Epistle* 19.9 we hear:

volo tibi hoc loco referre dictum Maecenatis vera in ipso eculeo elocuti: "ipsa enim altitudo attonat summa"; si quaeris in quo libro dixerit: in eo, qui Prometheus inscribitur. hoc voluit dicere: "attonita habet summa."

Seneca's objection has been explained as the bold use of *attonare* to mean "to blast with thunder," as if height itself were blasting peaks or summits. But an additional source of irritation to the Stoic thinker may be that the quotation is a syntactically twisted version of a *locus communis* that is a particular favorite of his in both the tragedies and the philosophical writings.¹⁸ Hence the graphic image of an instrument of torture and the climactic charge of something worse than effeminacy:

est ergo tanti ulla potentia, ut sit tibi tam ebrius sermo? Ingeniosus vir ille fuit, magnum exemplum Romanae eloquentiae daturus, nisi illum enervasset felicitas, immo castrasset.

Seneca is not alone in his condemnation of Maecenas' prose.¹⁹ Even the dispassionate Quintilian indicts Maecenas' self-indulgence and as proof quotes three sentences:²⁰

sole et aurora rubent plurima;

inter sacra movit aqua fraxinos;

ne exsequias quidem unus inter miserimos viderem meas. (9.4.28)

¹⁷ Seneca's last group of quotations, "genium festo vix suo testem. tenuisve cerei fila et crepacem molam, focum mater aut uxor investiunt," presents difficulties beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that they exhibit the same Maecenetan quirks as the other quotations: the separation of *festo* from *suo*, the neologism *crepacem* from *crepare*, and, if the text is sound, the bold metaphor of mother or wife as the clothing of a hearth. For a full discussion of textual problems and possible emendations, see Avallone (above, note 1) 244-46.

¹⁸ Cf. Seneca *Ag.* 57-63, 92-95, *Phaedra* 1123-40, *Oed.* 8-11.

¹⁹ André *Mécène* (above, note 1, 100) finds it notable that Seneca the Elder, in contrast to his son, finds nothing objectionable in Maecenas. In fact, as literary critic he is always presented in a favorable light. See, for example, *Suas.* 1.12, where Maecenas stands as a critic of bombast.

²⁰ It has been surmised that by Quintilian's time the writings of Maecenas had been canonized as a proverbial goldmine of *mala exempla* of style. Cf. Avallone (above, note 1) 266.

In all cases probably the object of Quintilian's censure is what Seneca called "verba contra consuetudinem posita." The first fragment, describing a landscape reddening at dawn, has the strange separation of *plurima* from *aurora*, the adjective being a feminine ablative but not apparently so on first reading. Similar syntactical looseness marks the next quotation where the separation of *sacra* from *aqua* opens the possibility of at first taking *sacra* as the object of *inter*. Also unusual is the intransitive use of the verb. Quintilian singles out the last quotation for especial blame because of Maecenas' inability to restrain his verbal frivolity on the topic of death and says of it: "quod inter haec pessimum est, quia in re tristi ludit compositio." The structure of the sentence is certainly loose with its separation of noun and modifier, and in this case the separation is truly misleading; for the opening words seduce the reader into expecting a statement about Maecenas witnessing someone's funeral only to have the final *meas* express the absurdity of Maecenas witnessing his *own* funeral. West, who reads the line as expressing a typical Epicurean attitude toward death, translates: "I would not be one of the gloomiest people even at my own funeral."²¹ Be that as it may, Quintilian's use of the word *ludit* to describe the line is an indication of the tone of the passage, and even though the rhetor is not amused, the original intention behind the words was certainly to treat death in terms of *lusus*.

One fragment may perhaps balance all the negative assessments of Maecenas. Servius, commenting on the phrase *faciles oculos* in *Aeneid* 8.310, says that Vergil's inspiration for the phrase was his patron's *Symposium*, with its description of the power of wine: "idem umor ministrat faciles oculos, pulchriora reddit omnia et dulcis iuventae reducit bona." Certainly, these lines with their sympotic warmth, metonymy, and graceful rhythm do prove the veracity of Seneca's statement that Maecenas was, in fact, capable of eloquence and genius, had he only also been capable of self-discipline.²² Finally, Vergil's application of Maecenas' phrase to the eyes of his hero can only be regarded as a compliment of the highest order.

While Maecenas' prose will probably always stand in need of an apologist or at least an elucidator, the remains of poetry exhibit a more immediate accessibility and have in some measure won the approval of critics both ancient and modern. Even Seneca found something good to say about at least one hexameter. If the poetic fragments strike the modern reader as successful, one reason may be Maecenas' choice of model, Catullus. Most obviously Catullan in inspiration are three lines preserved by Caesius Bassus (*de metris* 4.8-17; *Gramm. Lat.* VI 262, 6-19 Keil):²³

²¹ D. West, "Cur Me Querelis (Horace, *Odes* 2.17)," *AJP* 112 (1991) 45-52; Avallone (above, note 1, 270-75) like earlier commentators, has noted the Epicureanism of the line. Very different in tone and meaning from the version above is that of H.E. Butler's Loeb translation (1922): "May I never, alone amidst the most miserable of men, behold my own funeral rites." Kappelmacher (above, note 1, 224), who also sees humor in the line, adduces a parallel from Horace *Ode* 2. 20, 21-24: "absint inani funere neniae / luctusque turpes et querimoniae; / compece clamorem et sepulcri / mitte supervacuus honores." It has been suggested that Seneca parodied this line in the *Apocolocyntosis* where the dead Claudius does indeed witness his own obsequies. On this point see André, *Mécène écrivain* (above, note 1) 1774 note 104.

²² Kappelmacher (above, note 1, 222-23) pointing out the striking rhythm of the sentence, comments on its poetic qualities: "Es ist also eine Prosa in der die Grenze zwischen Poesie und Prosa sehr verschwicht ist."

²³ Another fragment cited by Caesius Bassus, *De metris* 4.8-17 (*Gramm. Lat.* VI 262, 25-263, 3 Keil): "hic nympha cingit omnis Acheloum senem" may or may not be connected to these galliambics. For fuller discussion see Avallone (above, note 1) 319.

'ades' inquit 'o Cybebe, fera montium dea,
 ades et sonante tympano quate flexibile caput.'

 'latus horreat flagello, comitum chorus ululet.'

An invocation to Cybele in galliambics, the lines clearly recall Catullus 63 in meter, content, and vocabulary.²⁴

Further evidence of Catullan influence is to be found in two very similar addresses to Horace.²⁵ The first of these is cited by Suetonius in his life of Horace:

ni te visceribus meis, Horati
 plus iam diligo, tu tuum sodalem
 (ninnio) videas strigiosorem. (11-13, Rostagni)

This, the traditional reading of the text, may be rendered: "Horace, if I do not love you more than my inmost being, may you see your friend scrawnier than a nag(?).²⁶ Recently, W. Noetzel has argued that for the vexed *ninnio* we read *Tithono*, since Tithonus was poetically proverbial for emaciation.²⁷ This yields excellent sense (being metrically apt also), though, whatever the correct version, the poem exhibits both a certain charm and a facility with hendecasyllables. Its Catullan echoes are unmistakable,²⁸ as is the self-deprecating humor lent by the usage of *strigus*, a term normally applied to cattle or livestock. Amusing too is the poem's oscillation between the literal and the metaphorical, as the word *viscera* in the first line stands for Maecenas himself but then with the mention of the homely physical adjective *strigiosorem* suggests literally "guts."²⁹ Finally, if *Tithono* is the correct reading, the

²⁴ For a full discussion of Maecenas' debt to Catullus, see Avallone (above, note 1) 300-08. André, *Mécène* (above, note 1, 105) sees in these verses and in others of Maecenas "l'inspiration morale et la curiosité religieuse," but given the ambiguity of tone in so many of the passages, this is to read too much into the text. See West (above, note 21) for a balancing view.

²⁵ Among the most important recent studies on the relationship of Horace and Maecenas are: K.J. Reckford, "Horace and Maecenas," *TAPA* 90 (1959) 195-208; M.C.J. Putnam, "Horace c. 3.30: The Lyricist as Hero," *Ramus* 2 (1973) 1-19; E. Lefèvre, "Horaz und Maecenas," *ANRW* 31.3.ii (1981) 1987-2029; J. Zetzel, "The Poetics of Patronage in the Late First Century, B.C.," in *Literary and Artistic Patronage in Ancient Rome*, B. Gold, ed. (Austin 1982) 87-102; R.J. Baker, "Maecenas and Horace *Satires* II.8," *CJ* 83 (1988) 212-32; and David West (above, note 21), whose reinterpretation of some fragments of Maecenas is illuminating.

²⁶ The word *ninnio* has been the subject of much conjecture. It has been thought to be a diminutive of Greek *ninnos* (doll), a word for hag, or perhaps a proper name Ninnius, some contemporary proverbial for skinniness. For a full discussion of matters textual and interpretive see Avallone (above, note 1) 296-99.

²⁷ W. Noetzel, "Zum Maecenas-Epigramm in der *Horazvita*," *Gymnasium* 64 (1957) 27. He is seconded by E. Bickel, "Zum Maecenas-Epigramm in Suetons *Horazvita*," *RhM* 99 (1956) 380, who calls Noetzel's emendation "ein unbestreitbar bleibender wissenschaftlicher Fund."

²⁸ Besides the meter, the language is clearly Catullan; cf. 14: "ni ti plus oculis meis amarem"; and 45: "Acme / ni te perdit amo atque amare porro / omnes sum adsidue paratus annos."

²⁹ Fougny (above, note 1, 39) deftly conveys the tone of the poem in his rendering: "Si déjà je ne t'aime pas plus que mes propres entrailles, tu pourrais voir ton camarade plus décharné qu'un vieux mulet."

lines have an additional touch of Alexandrian erudition, comically incongruous with the rest of the diction.

The same tone of humor, again with a touch of self-parody, runs through the other poetic address to Horace:

lucentes, mea vita, nec smaragdos
beryllos mihi, Flacce, nec nitentes
nec percandida margarita quaero
nec quos Thynica lima perpolivit
anulos neque iasprios lapillos. (Isid., *Etym.* XIX 32, 6)

"O my life, not glimmering emeralds, not, Flaccus, sparkling beryls, not bright shining pearls do I seek, and not rings polished by Bithynian files and not jaspary gemlets." The subject is certainly luxuriating and so is the tone with its abundance of Greek names, the eccentric placement of *nec* between noun and modifier, the chiasmus in the first two lines, the unconventional neuter plural of *margarita*, the diminutive *lapillos*, and finally the neologism in *iasprios*, making these not mere jaspars but "jaspary gemlets." The poem is an exercise in excess and clearly meant as another instance of self-parody. For Maecenas's gaudy display of gems was notorious and elicited a famous jibe from Augustus himself who connected the passion for jewels with Maecenas' "stilus mollis et dissolutus."³⁰

Two fragments are often cited by moderns as indications of Maecenas' more serious preoccupation with mortality and of the connection between his poetry and his spiritual dimension. The majestic hexameter "nec tumulum curo: sepelit natura relictos" quoted in *Ep. Mor.* 92.35 is one Vergil could have been proud of, and it is the sole fragment either in prose or in poetry to win Seneca's praise, no doubt because it accords with the philosopher's own views on the nothingness of death.³¹ Another fragment, also from Seneca, cited this time with a paroxysm of outrage is:

debilem facito manu, debilem pede, coxa
tuber adstrue gibberum, lubricos quate dentes;
vita dum superest, bene est; hanc mihi, vel acuta
si sedeam cruce, sustine. (*Ep. Mor.* 101.11)

While Seneca has an axe to grind over the content of the verses, specifically, the sentiment, unacceptable to a Stoic, of life at any cost, modern commentators have focussed on the stylistic eccentricities of the verses as, for example, the periphrasis of *debilem facere* for *debilitare* and the odd word *coxa* used in place of *femur*,³² or they have found the lines to contain a philosophical or spiritual statement on the part of

³⁰ Macrobius *Sat.* 2.4.12: "Idem Augustus quia Maecenatem suum noverat stilo esse remisso, molli et dissoluto, talem se in epistulis quas ad eum scribebat saepius exhibebat, et contra castigationem loquendi, quam alias ille scribendo servabat, in epistula ad Maecenatem familiari plura in iocos effusa subtexit: 'vale mi ebum Medulliae, ebur ex Etruria, lasar Arretinum, adamas Supernas, Tiberinum margaritum, Cilniorum smaragde, iaspi Iguvinorum, berulle Porsenae, carbunculum Hadriae, ἰνα συντέμω πάντα, μάλαγμα moecharum.'" B. Baldwin ("Maecenas and Trimalchio," *Latomus* 43 [1984] 402-03) believes that Petronius has Trimalchio parody Maecenas at *Sat.* 34 and 55.5.

³¹ One other hexameter, again exhibiting a measure of sonority, is extant from Charisius, *Inst. gramm.* I (*Gramm. Lat.* I 79, 23-80, I Keil): "ingeritur fumans calido cum farre catinus." Identification is, of course, highly speculative, most scholars thinking the source to be bucolic.

³² See Avallone (above, note 1) 287-95 for a complete analysis of philological oddities.

Maecenas.³³ Recently, however, D. West has advanced a compelling argument that the verses are and can only be satirical. Pointing out "the anaphora of *debilem*, the assonance of *tub-* and *lub-*, the pleonasm of *tuber* and *gibberum*, the internal echo of *superest* and *est* in line 5, the climactic resolution of the basis of *si sedeam . . .* the general coarseness of the language and the meter," West concludes that the lines are an intentional piece of doggerel that only a philosopher could misread as serious.³⁴ This author can do no better than to quote his translation:

Maim my hand and
lame my foot,
stick a hump upon my back,
rot my teeth and make them slack,
but one thing give—just let me live.
Give me that and I don't give a toss
if you make me sit on the prong of the cross.

This rereading of a passage often taken in the past as a serious philosophical pronouncement or personal manifesto on death is further indication of how much of Maecenas' poetry is shot through with humor and parody. What is true of the poetry holds also for at least some of the prose fragments, whose linguistic and syntactical oddities need not be attributed to decadent morals but rather to verbal playfulness.

How are we to evaluate Maecenas as a writer? A definitive answer will always be as elusive as the remains are fragmentary. Contemporaries like Agrippa viewed him with contempt and dismissed his writing as *cacozelia*, even tarring his protégé Vergil with the same brush, while Tacitus, echoing Seneca, was no less harsh in his judgment on Maecenas' style which he pronounced to be as whorish and gaudily colored as his clothes.³⁵ Modern critical judgment, though more generous than that of the ancients, has been widely divided.³⁶ Some modern critics have shared Seneca's judgment of Maecenas as flaunter of bad taste, while apologists have gone so far as to read into the fragments a serious preoccupation with matters mystic or philosophical, and he has been variously labeled Alexandrian, Asianist, impenitent baroque, *classisant*, or precursor of Silver Age mannerism. The loss of almost all he wrote, whether regrettable or not, will make all judgment tentative, but it has been one aim of this study to show that when it comes to analyzing the tone of many of the fragments a sense of humor can abet philology's dissection. In the end, however,

³³ So Andre, *Mécène écrivain* (above, note 1, 1771) who sees the prayer as directed to the *Fortuna gubernans* of the Epicurean school. I do not agree that the quotation exhibits what he calls a "plus grande sobriété de vocabulaire et d'architecture."

³⁴ D. West (above, note 21) 47-48.

³⁵ Donatus tells us (44): "M. Vipsianus a Maecenate eum suppositum appellabat novae cacozeliae repertorem, non tumidae nec exilis, sed ex omnibus verbis, atque ideo latentis." Of *cacozelia* Quintilian (*Inst.* 8.3.56) gives the following definition: "kakozelon, id est mala affectatio, per omne dicendi genus peccat; nam et tumida et pusilla et praedulcia et abundantia et arcessita et exsultantia sub idem nomen cadunt. denique kakozelon vocatur quidquies est ultra virtutem, quotiens ingenium iudicio caret et specie boni fallitur, omnium in eloquentia vitiorum pessimum. non cetera parum vitantur, hoc petitur." Tacitus's (*Dial.* 26.1) critique is: "malim hercule C. Gracchi impetum aut L. Crassi maturitatem quam calamistros Maecenatis aut tinnitus Gallionis: adeo melius est orationem vel hirta toga induere quam fucatis et meretriciis vestibus insignire."

³⁶ For a survey of modern critical opinion of Maecenas as writer see André, *Mécène écrivain* (above, note 1) 1776-82.

Maecenas remains, in the words of Horace, the *candidus iudex*—the discerning spirit that first recognized Propertius, Horace, and Vergil.³⁷

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³⁷ This paper was originally presented on 4 April 1991 at a meeting of CAMWS, and I am grateful for the encouraging reception it received from listeners. Words of thanks go also to Professor Edwin Menes of Loyola University of Chicago for valuable suggestions and to Mr. James Kelleman for keen proofreading.