Georgic 3.41: A Vergilian Wordplay at the Expense of Maecenas

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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
tactos, tua, Maecenas, haud mollis iussa.

The humor, as this note aims to show, resides in the juxtaposition of Maecenas' name with the phrase *baud mollis 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, *mollis Sabaei*. There is irony in Vergil calling his patron's commands *baud mollis* 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 distincto petebatur); hunc esse qui in
tribunali, in rostris, in omni publico coetu sic apparuerit ut pallio
velaretur caput excluserit utrimque auribus, non aliter quam in mimo
fugitivi divitis solent; hunc esse qui tunc maxime civilibus bellis
strepetibus 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 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 *pantominus* Bathyllus (Tacitus, *Ann.* 1.54; Dio 54.17.5). Even Augustus himself was astonished at the extremities of Maecenas' foppery and derided him for his *μηροθρεύεις 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 mihi taurus in erro.* More recently, Carl Springer writing about the same *Eclogue* has observed *paranomasia* in the word *ator* and the name Aratus. 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


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


