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1

The Parallel Lives of Maecenas

Maecenas was the wisest counsellor, the truest friend, both of his prince and his country, the best governor of Rome, the happiest and ablest negotiator, the best judge of learning and virtue, the choicest in his friends, and thereby the happiest in his conversation that has been known in story; and I think, to his conduct in civil, and Agrippa's in military affairs, may be truly ascribed all the fortunes and greatness of Augustus, so much celebrated in the world.

—WILLIAM TEMPLE, *THE GARDENS OF EPICURUS* (1685)

How Maecenas lived is too notorious to need narrating.

—SENECA, *EPISTLES* 114.4

And a third (is it myself?) whom I see even more dimly than the others . . .

—JOHN WILLIAMS, *AUGUSTUS* (1972)

LET US START with the life of Maecenas—or rather his several lives and the multiple biographies that bind them together. He is like a coin with two faces. On one side, a figurehead; on the other, a more complex knot of images.

What follows is a cautious summary of his career, a mixture of certainties and “maybes” digested from the ancient sources.¹ Gaius Cilnius Maecenas was born on April 13 sometime between 78 and 64 BCE, in or near Arretium (modern Arezzo) in Etruria.² The name Maecenas derives from an Etruscan settlement,

1. Based on Kappelmacher (1928) and La Penna (1987, 1996); Gowers (2017a) is a thumbnail summary. Chillet (2016: 476–84) transforms an eccentric outsider into a central political figure. See Graverini (1997) for a comprehensive twentieth-century bibliography.

2. April 13: Hor. *Carm.* 4.11.14–16. Guesses at his birth year are extrapolated from his date of death, helped by a rough sense that Virgil was his coeval and Horace his slight junior.

otherwise unknown.³ The Cilnii (perhaps his mother's family) were wealthy but insular Aretines.⁴ The Maecenates were a more upwardly mobile family (including a knight, C. Maecenas, mentioned by Cicero, and a *scriba*, L. Maecenas, present at the murder of Sertorius in 72 BCE).⁵ Maecenas met and befriended the young Octavian and may have participated in the military campaigns of the forties and thirties BCE: Philippi, Perugia and even Actium. His contacts and fund raising in north-east Italy may have assisted Octavian's rise to power.⁶ But he was probably busier acquiring the estates of proscribed individuals and boosting his wealth. There are papyrus records of his property holdings in Egypt.⁷ He acquired an estate on the Esquiline Hill in Rome, said to have been confiscated from Favonius, a supporter of Cato.⁸

Along with Marcus Agrippa, Maecenas became unelected adviser to the future emperor and was known as a diplomat and swift suppressor of conspiracies.⁹ As caretaker of the city of Rome in Octavian's absences (36–33 and 31–29 BCE), he was invested with exceptional ad hoc executive power, yet chose to remain in the ranks of the knights (*equites*), never holding a formal magistracy.¹⁰ Tacitus speaks of his “downwardly mobile ambition” (*praepostera ambitio*).¹¹ Brokering Octavian's first marriage, with Scribonia, in 40 BCE, he was instrumental in peace negotiations between Octavian and Antony at Tarentum (40) and Brundisium (37).¹² Meanwhile, he fostered an outstanding group of poets, including Horace and Virgil. He married, divorced and perhaps remarried

3. Varro, *Ling.* 8.41

4. Chillet 2016: 34. Livy 10.3. *Cilnius* at Tac. *Ann.* 6.11.3 may indicate either a suppressed Etruscan-style matronymic *gentilicium* (family name) or that Tacitus was confused by Augustus's nickname for Maecenas, “emerald of the Cilnii” (Macrob. *Sat.* 2.4.12); Simpson 1996; Graverini 2006: 53–56.

5. Cic. *Clu.* 153; Sall. *Hist. fr.* 3.79 McGushin; Chillet 2016: 34.

6. Chillet 2016: 171–233.

7. Estates in Egypt: *PIR*² M 37 (p. 134); Rostovtzeff 1957: 2.671; Parassoglou 1978; Sijpesteijn 1985; Capponi 2002. Wallace-Hadrill (2008: 411) guesses that he was involved with the lucrative Arretine pottery trade.

8. Schol. *ad Juv.* 5.3.

9. The first of the fluctuating groups of friends who informally advised Roman emperors: Crook 1955: 21–30.

10. Equestrian status: Cresci 1995; Dakouras 2006. Octavian's deputy: Vell. Pat. 2.88.2 (“*urbis custodiis praepositus*”); Tac. *Ann.* 6.11; *Eleg. in Maec.* 1.14 (“*Romanae tu uigil Urbis eras*”); Dio Cass. 49.16, 51.3, 55.7; Porph. *ad Hor. Carm.* 3.29.25 (“*urbis praefectum*”; a title that did not exist in Maecenas's time); Syme 1939: 292.

11. Tac. *Ann.* 16.17.

12. App. *B Civ.* 5.53.

Terentia, sister of L. Licinius Murena, who plotted against Augustus (23 BCE).¹³ Maecenas is said to have warned Murena that the conspiracy had come to light, whereupon the emperor rejected him for his indiscretion.¹⁴ Alternatively, it was because of Augustus's very public affair with Terentia (16 BCE) or because the two men grew apart and became bored with each other that the friendship cooled and became, in Tacitus's words, "more an image than a reality."¹⁵ At any rate, from this point we hear no more about Maecenas. Either he fell out of favour or was simply allowed to withdraw from public life.¹⁶ Nothing is known about his death, allegedly in 8 BCE, two months before that of Horace, who was buried next to him.¹⁷ He left no children and bequeathed everything to Augustus.

So far, this is the story of an efficient multitasker who managed the transition from Republic to Empire while overseeing a "golden age" of Latin poetry—a man who rose from obscure origins to become a friend, mediator and kingmaker, then equally mysteriously disappeared from view. But glaringly absent from this account are the many notorious traces of Maecenas's private life (or rather, his confusion of public and private life): passions, pleasures, whims, habits, postures and weaknesses that together suggest a distinctive personal style, an idiosyncratic way of being in the world.¹⁸ Seneca single-handedly serves up the most shocking picture of Maecenas, accusing him of cutting a scandalous figure in the streets of Rome and conducting official business while wearing trailing robes and flanked by two eunuchs "more man than he was".¹⁹ Elsewhere, he is cited as an expert on wine, jewels and fish and credited with various innovations, from a new system of shorthand to

13. The couple are cited as colluding in the payment of a *donatio* (which enticed a divorcing wife to return to her husband; *Dig.* 24.1.65); Guarino 1992: 145n38; Martini 1995; Urbanik 2016: 479–80.

14. Suet. *Aug.* 66.3; Gardthausen 1964. Gordon Williams (1990: 260) objects that the smoking out of the conspiracy would have pleased Augustus. Pliny's list of Augustus's tribulations (*HN* 7.147–59) omits Maecenas, suggesting that the breach was unconnected with the conspiracy or Augustus's succession problems (White 1991: 130–32; Reckford 1959: 198–99; Syme 1939: 333–43).

15. Tac. *Ann.* 3.30, dismissed by White (1991: 133–34, citing Schomberg [1766: 62–63] on Maecenas's "happy retirement, consecrated to his pleasure which consisted in study"). White (1991: 135) reads Tac. *Ann.* 14.53.3—"otium . . . permisit"—as a euphemism for compulsory retirement.

16. Gordon Williams 1990: 261–62; White 1991.

17. Suet. *Vita Hor.*

18. Labate 2012: 413.

19. Sen. *Ep.* 114.6.

heated swimming pools and serving baby donkey meat.²⁰ Fragments remains of his experimental poetry and rule-breaking prose.²¹ His park on the Esquiline is said to have included a viewing tower, the one from which Nero fiddled while Rome burned.²²

Maecenas's emotional life, meanwhile, seems to have been complex and fretful.²³ Augustus, who seduced Terentia, called him *malagma moecharum*, "putty in married women's hands", "butterer-up of unfaithful wives" or "the married woman's mattress".²⁴ Seneca sneered that he was "even more womanish than his spouse", subject to "daily rejections" by his sulky wife.²⁵ Meanwhile, he was besotted with a celebrity pantomime actor, Bathyllus.²⁶ He may have been an Epicurean, a flawed one.²⁷ For Seneca, his name was as synonymous with pleasure-seeking or self-indulgence (*deliciae*) as Apicius's was with cookery.²⁸ But this devotion to pleasure was double-edged. If Maecenas is depicted alone in his gardens, enjoying the sensory pleasures of running water and birdsong, he is also imagined as tossing and turning with lovesickness on a feather bed, barely soothed by the sound of fountains and far-off music.²⁹ Along with dinner parties and ball games, we read about insomnia, hypochondria, three-year-long fevers and a morbid fear of death.³⁰

Everything in the collage of biographical "facts" in the paragraphs above has been pasted together out of scattered literary testimony from the age of Augustus to the third century CE, from lyric poetry to historiography to encyclopaedias. Except for a few new inscriptions, the sources have not expanded; what varies is how they have been assessed.³¹ For many observers, Maecenas's private habits have carried far more weight than his public achievements. Sir Ronald Syme's verdict is typically searing:

The Roman [Agrippa] loathed the effeminate and sinister descendant of Etruscan kings who flaunted in public the luxury and the vices in which his

20. Plin. *HN* 14.67; 37, *praef.*; 23, *praef.*; 8.170; Dio 55.7.6.

21. Lunderstedt 1911; Avallone [1962/63]; Makowski 1991; Mattiacci 1995.

22. Suet. *Ner.* 38.

23. Dio 54.30.4; Sen. *Ep.* 114.6; *Prov.* 3.10.

24. Macrobian. *Sat.* 2.4.12.

25. Plin. *HN* 14.67.

26. Bathyllus: schol. *ad Epod.* 14.9; schol. *ad Pers.* 5.123: "libertus Maecenatis"; Sen. *Controv.* 10 *praef.* 8, Tac. *Ann.* 1.54.2; Dio 54.17.5.

27. André 1967: 15–61; Graverini 1997: 243–46.

28. *Ep.* 120.1.

29. *Eleg. in Maec.* 1.33–36; Sen. *Prov.* 3.10.

30. Vell. Pat. 2.88; Sen. *Prov.* 3.10; Plin. *HN* 7.172; Hor. *Carm.* 2.17; Sen. *Ep.* 101.10–11.

31. *AE* 2011, 1703 and 1708; Chillet 2016: 8–9.

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. (Syme 1939: 341–42)

Here is Jasper Griffin in more indulgent vein:

He was a byword for effeminate fabrics . . . and was teased by Augustus for his interest in jewels; his house was palatial . . . and his gardens never lost their celebrity. (J. Griffin 1994: 13)

From Henri Richer in the eighteenth century to Francis Cairns in the twenty-first, biographers have highlighted Maecenas's associations with luxury, effeminacy and literary affectation.³² An aura of neurosis and melancholy still clings to him. Hints of physiological and psychic discomfort add to the impression that there is an intense subjectivity to be recovered, if only the sources allowed.³³ Pathology is reported as fact: "As early as 29 or 28, Maecenas was a very sick man. Once at least he had a very close escape from death; a psychological terror of death may have joined with insomnia to torture him in later life."³⁴ As we will see, however, this tortured Maecenas is usually a function of the rhetorical purposes to which his personality was put: as the troubled recipient of soothing lyric poetry (in Horace) or as a deficient antitype in Stoic metaphysics (in Seneca the Younger).

In Maecenas's case, the split personality was central to his reputation, whether conceived as agile movement between public and private domains or as failure to separate them. He was technically speaking *priuatus*, in that he had no elected public role. Yet "public" and "private" are hard concepts to separate in the relationships of prominent late-Republican and early imperial figures. The association with the poets, for example: was that a public or a private matter? The erotic triangle between Maecenas, Terentia and Augustus: public or private? Maecenas's activities turn out to be typical of, even constitutive of, "the interleaving of the 'personal' (not necessarily the 'intimate') and the public", in a period where personal alliances served political aims and political alliances were represented in terms of the friendships (*amicitiae*) from which they arose.³⁵

32. Richer 1746; Cairns 2006.

33. André 1967: 61.

34. Reckford 1959: 198.

35. Pelling 2009: 45; Hor. *Sat.* 1.5.29 ("auersos soliti componere amicos"), *Carm.* 2.1.3–4 ("grauisque . . . amicitias"). Kennedy (1992) deconstructs the terms "political" and "private" for the Second Triumvirate. Still, the dialectic distinction had legs: e.g., Cic. *Mur.* 76 ("odit populus Romanus priuatam luxuriam, publicam magnificentiam diligit").

As an abrupt transition in Plutarch's life of Lucullus suggests, the half-statesman-half-voluptuary was a familiar biographical type:

And it is true that in the life of Lucullus, as in an old comedy, one reads in the first part of political measures and military commands, and in the latter part of drinking-bouts, and banquets, and what might pass for revelry, and torch-races, and all kinds of frivolity. (Plut. *Luc.* 39.1)

If his character can be captured at all, Maecenas turns out to be a composite of many historical characters, future as well as past. Not only do his biographical portraits break down into specifically Roman types or Greco-Roman cultural norms, they have subsequently been fleshed out with stereotypes retrojected from later periods: aesthete, millionaire, gourmet, decadent, culture minister, dandy, hippy.³⁶ Judging from the nationalities of recent biographers, Maecenas has translated especially comfortably to the lands of *bella figura* and *hommes de l'ombre*.³⁷ British writers, meanwhile, tend to "other" him as a continental European: *éminence grise*, *petit maître* . . .³⁸

How has this contradictory bundle of attributes arisen? There are three ways in through the ancient textual legacy. First, there are the various biographical details found in imperial histories, rhetorical treatises and miscellanies: Velleius Paterculus, Seneca the Elder, Pliny the Elder, Suetonius, Plutarch, Tacitus and Cassius Dio, among others. Anachronistic though it is to start with them, they are the backbone of our testimony. It cannot be stressed enough that no contemporary accounts of Maecenas survive, from the Augustan period or earlier, except for what the poets tell us, and a few extracts from the alleged correspondence of Augustus. The fullest ancient lives belong to the post-Augustan period, and, even then, are usually no more than paragraph-length. Particularly precious is the short chiaroscuro sketch by Velleius Paterculus, writing under Tiberius in the twenties CE, that portrays Maecenas as an efficient statesman who confined devotion to luxury to his spare time:

At that time C. Maecenas was put in charge of internal affairs, a knight but one born into a distinguished family. When vigilance was required, he was utterly insomniac, far-sighted and resourceful; but when it was time to relax after work, he sprawled in pampered ease, almost out-womaning women [otio ac mollitiis paene ultra feminam fluens]. (Vell. Pat. 2.88)

36. Graverini 2006: 51: "Forse in Mecenate c'era un po' del ricco Americano"; Bardon 1949: 164: "le premier en date des baroques latines"; Henderson 1996: 79: "the hippy patron".

37. Fougnyes 1947; Avallone [1962/63]; André 1967; Paturzo 1999; Le Doze 2014; Chillet 2016.

38. Buchan 1937: 144, 187. See p. 408 below.

More straightforwardly negative is the celebrated “symphony of grievances” in Seneca’s *Epistle* 114, written under Nero, which culminates in this climactic passage:³⁹

How Maecenas lived his life is too notorious now to need retelling, how he sauntered, how pampered he was, how he wanted to be stared at, how he did not care for his vices to be concealed. In short, was his speech not as loose as it was louche? Were his words not as distinctive as his dress sense, his entourage, his home, his wife? He would have been a brilliant man if he had followed a straighter path, if he had avoided being unintelligible, if his language had not been so dissolute. You will see the involved expression of a drunken man, wandering and licentious. . . . [Don’t you know] that this was the man who always processed through the city wearing trailing robes (even when he stood in for Caesar in his absence, the signal was requested from a man in civilian dress); this the man who on the tribunal, on the rostra, in every public context appeared to have covered his head with his cloak, with just his ears peeking out at the side, a bit like a rich man’s run-away slaves in a mime; this the man who in the raging din of civil strife, with Rome in a state of emergency under martial law, appeared in public flanked by two eunuchs, more men than he was; this the man who had only one wife but married her a thousand times? (Sen. *Ep.* 114.4–6)

Maecenas is here famously condemned in the language of “letting it all hang out”, relevant to every aspect of his personality from his trailing garments to his uncontrolled use of metaphors. His literary style was as *discinctus* (“unbelted”) as his flowing robes.

To the rescue (or rather, party to the same debate, given the uncertain chronology) come two anonymous imperial texts. In the *Laus Pisonis*, which cites him as a model for all patrons, the word “Maecenas” is first used as a type-name. A pair of elegies, *Elegiae in Maecenatem*, are devoted to rehabilitating their subject as an all-round civilized human being, one who richly deserved a life of ease after his executive career and military service (the latter implausibly overplayed). Maecenas takes a supporting role in Suetonius’s *Lives* of Augustus and Horace, which appear around the time that imperial memories of the Augustan Age, primarily nostalgic or envious, start to crystallize in Martial, Quintilian, Tacitus and Juvenal.⁴⁰ These authors remember Maecenas for his generosity, luxury and affected literary style, which they cast in frothy metaphors that only

39. André 1967: 19: “orchestration de tous les griefs”. See p. 256–66 below on this passage.

40. The Horatian commentaries of Porphyrio (second century CE) and pseudo-Acro (fifth century CE) and Servius’s commentaries on Virgil (fourth century CE) contain further testimony, often extrapolated from the relevant texts; Costa 2014.

reinforce his reputation for actual personal adornment.⁴¹ Emperor Augustus speaks of the “myrrh-drenched ringlets” (myrobrechis cincinnos) of Maecenas’s poetic flourishes, so plaiting together literary and personal style.⁴² Seneca refers to his “drunken speech” (ebrius sermo) and “effeminate poetry” (carminis effeminati), and Tacitus to his rhetorical “curling tongs” (calamistros); for Quintilian, his words “frolic and flirt” (exultent atque lasciuiani).⁴³ After his death, Maecenas’s voice is ventriloquized, first in an imaginary deathbed apologia (*Elegiae in Maecenatem* 2) and then in the long but incomplete speech to Augustus advocating monarchical rule fabricated for him by Cassius Dio (third century CE).⁴⁴ Both fictions suggest a strong need to compensate for the unnerving silence of the contemporary testimony.⁴⁵ Dio also leaves a sympathetic sketch in the form of an embedded obituary (55.7.1–6), which praises Maecenas for his forbearance and records his good influence on Augustus.

A second category of material, thin but hugely influential, is found in poems addressed to Maecenas by Virgil, Horace and Propertius. A central claim of this book will be that the poets give him a role far more significant than their brief name-dropping suggests. We will see how often the later biography is extrapolated from their meagre testimony, then reapplied by scholars and other readers to interpret the poems from which it is derived. Overwhelmingly, the poets portray Maecenas as a crucial supporter and role model, almost a muse—while revealing frustratingly little about the man himself. One scholar notes “his curious diffusion, almost his ubiquity. . . . [H]e is everywhere in the poems. . . . Yet he is . . . almost nowhere in them . . . so pervasive as to be almost transparent.”⁴⁶ Barely a presence in Virgil, Maecenas becomes something abstract to push against in Propertius. He also appears on the margins of a famous *autobiography*, the many-faceted self-portrait in Horace’s poetic corpus, where he remains a shadowy sketch, a mirror or yardstick for the poet himself.

It is generally Horace who gives us the best snapshots of Maecenas. The *Satires* and *Epistles* reveal his taste for ball games after lunch, his squeamish objection to jagged fingernails, his fondness for play (pranks, puzzles, comedy and mindless chitchat).⁴⁷ Meanwhile, the grander *Odes* supply the sleeplessness, the love of oriental perfumes and wine and the troublesome wealth (all unreliable

41. Mart. 1.107.4, 7.29.7, 8.56 (55), 10.73.4, 12.3.2; Tac. *Ann.* 1.54, 3.30, 14.53, 55; Juv. 1.66, 7.94, 12.39.

42. Suet. *Aug.* 86.2.

43. Sen. *Ep.* 19.1, 101.13; Tac. *Dial.* 26; Quint. 9.4.28.

44. Dio Cass. 52.14–40. The speech (and the companion piece ascribed to Agrippa) is no true record but reflects third-century CE debates; R. Meyer 1986.

45. For ancient *pseudepigrapha* (fakes) as creative attempts to fill gaps, see Peirano (2012).

46. W. Ralph Johnson 1993: 33.

47. Hor. *Sat.* 1.5.48–49; *Epist.* 1.1.104; *Epod.* 3, *Carm.* 3.8, *Sat.* 2.6.44–45.

attributes, we will see, inspired by concerns specific to lyric poetry). Overall, the continuity of Maecenas as dedicatee across Horace's work offers a unique chance to test the role of genre as a determining factor in his portraits. At the same time, the controlled frequency of these glimpses reinforces the impression of a credible, three-dimensional figure, one kept slightly out of view.⁴⁸

A third way towards Maecenas is through his own voice. This is hard to hear authentically in a relatively thin corpus of decontextualized prose and poetic fragments, mere titles (*Prometheus*, *Symposium*, a paean to the emperor's sister Octavia's hair) and recherché Catullan verse-forms (galliambics, hendecasyllables, Priapeans).⁴⁹ Gleaned from moral tirades, imperial biographies and grammatical treatises, the fragments often come stripped of their original settings and dramatic personae. For all that, one recent editor is confident that "the preciousity and neuroticism of the author come through strongly."⁵⁰ Much has been made of an intriguing title, *De cultu suo*, "On His Own Style", which sounds like a personal manifesto or apology but may be only a scribal gloss on the letter (Sen. *Ep.* 114) in which it appears.⁵¹ As with the ethical assessments, modern readers tend to parrot the verdicts and the metaphors of ancient critics. Eduard Fraenkel, for example, dismissed Maecenas as "a hopeless epigone" of the poetic school of the previous generation (Catullus and the other *neoteri*), while Theodor Mommsen, picking up Tacitus's curling-tongs metaphor, named him "most disagreeable of all heart-withered, word-crimping court-poets."⁵²

Even so, the fragments are remarkable, and not just for being eccentric. There is often something almost too neat about them. They seem to plug a gap, supply exactly what we might expect to be the other half of Maecenas's mutual exchanges with his friends. Take two letters allegedly written by Augustus to Maecenas. One makes Horace the desired object in a jealous love triangle, with the emperor intervening to try to seduce him away from his current friend:

I used to be capable of writing letters to friends, but now that I am very busy and in poor health I want to steal our friend Horace from you. He will come from that parasite's table of yours to this royal one [ueniet ergo ab ista parasitica mensa ad hanc regiam] and help me with writing my letters. (Suet. *Vita Hor.*)

48. Cf. Most (1993: 91) on the "discrepancies and distortions, self-corrections, and self-contradictions" that make Hesiod such a paradoxically unified textual individual.

49. Lunderstedt 1911 (verse and prose); Courtney 2003 and Hollis 2007 (verse only).

50. Courtney 2003: 276.

51. See p. 230 below.

52. Fraenkel 1957: 17; Mommsen, 1856: 215: "den unleidlichsten aller herzvertrockneten und worteverkräuselnden Hofpoeten".

The other teases Maecenas with a parody of his precious style, playfully combining Etruscan adjectives with exotic stones:

Farewell, my honey of Medullia, ivory of Etruria, silphium of Arezzo, diamond of the Adriatic, pearl of the Tiber, Cilnian emerald, jasper of Gubbio [or: of potters], beryl of Porsenna, carbuncle of Italy—may you get one!—in short, you butterer-up of married women. (Macrob. *Sat.* 2.4.12)

Together, the letters line up almost too perfectly with a counterpart fragment by Maecenas (on which more later), in which he seems to protest that Horace is worth more to him than all the jewels in the world:

Flaccus, love of my life, I do not seek out shining emeralds or sparkling beryls or gleaming pearls or rings that Bithynian files have polished or jasper gems. (2C = 3L = 185H)

The literary fragments help to flesh out the interpersonal relationships.⁵³ Even so, the circularity is tricky to negotiate. Did the febrile literary output determine the physical delicacy, or was it the other way around? Did the taste for rhetorical novelty and rarity derive from the jewel collecting, or did the jewel poem and matching letter feed the myth of the jewel collector?⁵⁴ Did the notion of Maecenas as collector of literary talent shape his reputation as a collector of other kinds of art? The sources are so patchy and the various strands of authenticity and fiction, metaphor and materiality, so hard to disentangle as to make any rigorous historical biography virtually impossible to write. For all the hints of sensory or anguished engagement with the world, specific delights and intimate friendships, the reality is that no individual consciousness can ever be recovered.

Nor is there much scope to discover for Maecenas what Patricia Fumerton, writing about the Elizabethans, has called a “memorable self”. Historical personalities have often been parcelled up in symbolic relics (gifts, scents, monuments, gems, seals, trinket-like poems, wills) that testify to uniqueness, fellow-feeling, taste and authority, and foster remembrance, longing and delight.⁵⁵ In Maecenas’s case, no such material objects survive. But underpinning his story is a web of associations with surrogacy and sentimental exchange, attempts by himself and others to conjure up and prolong his presence. Plutarch tells us, for instance, that Maecenas used to present Augustus with a drinking

53. See below pp. 324–28 on this exchange.

54. Bernoulli (1882: 1.239) uses letter and poem as evidence of Maecenas’s interest and pins his identity to certain gem portraits. See Petrain (2005) on the poem’s “jewelled” style.

55. See Fumerton (1991: 17) on the miniature mementos Charles I took to his execution.

bowl every year on his birthday (*Mor.* 207c). Scents of balsam, cinnamon and saffron waft around his tomb in the *Elegiae*. He used Augustus's seal as proxy for imperial authority, while his own seal, with the figure of a frog on it, "struck fear into the hearts" of those who received his tax demands.⁵⁶ He begged Augustus to "remember" his beloved Horace. For Augustus, meanwhile, Maecenas's death left a gap that could not be filled, even by a generous bequest.⁵⁷ But there is almost no physical legacy to contemplate beyond the still-disputed outline of Maecenas's Esquiline estate, long buried beneath Rome's Termini Station.

For all the ancient emphasis on Maecenas's bodily performance, we also have little idea what he looked like. Few antique portraits survive, and of those none can be securely identified.⁵⁸ As one nineteenth-century antiquarian put it: "It was long a cause of wonder and regret, that no gem, medal, or statue of a man so illustrious had ever been discovered."⁵⁹ Hopes of finding an authentic likeness remain wishful thinking on the part of archaeologists and biographers alike. Predictably, jewelled rings have been a favourite hunting ground. A portrait-type of a high-browed beardless man in profile was first optimistically identified as "Maecenas" by Philip, Duke of Orléans (1672–1723), based on an amethyst ring signed "Dioscorides" (an Augustan engraver). Decisively dismissed by Adolf Furtwängler in 1900 as a Renaissance fake, it is now stored in the Cabinet des Médailles in Paris. Another, a sardonyx signed by "Solon", once in the Piombino-Ludovisi collection in Rome, was similarly discredited, and is now lost.⁶⁰ Other examples include carnelians in Paris and Boston, a sardonyx in Naples and a garnet in New York. The British Museum has a possible head of Maecenas in intaglio at the end of a tiepin, repurposed to suit some eighteenth-century dandy.⁶¹

Sculptural types are equally hard to identify. The wreathed man who hovers, wizened and conspiratorial, in the background of the parade on the south frieze of the Ara Pacis has suggested "*éminence grise*" to some observers.⁶²

56. Plin. *HN* 37.4.10; Dio 51.3.5–6.

57. Suet. *Vita Hor.*; Dio 55.7.5; cf. Sen. *Ben.* 6.32.3 ("tota uita Agrippae et Maecenatis uacauit locus").

58. Bernoulli 1882: 1.237–45, "Maecenas"; André 1967: 10.

59. Charles Bryce, quoted in *Report of the Seventh Meeting of the Advancement of Science*. London (1838: xliii–iv); cf. *Athenaeum* 519 (1837): 754.

60. Ridley (2020) tells the full history, one of increasing scepticism among connoisseurs.

61. Bernoulli 1882: 1.238–41; Richter (1956: 104) is suspicious (the type is often confused with Cicero). Tie pin: Tait 1984: 127 (no. 850).

62. Moretti 1948: 231; cf. Andreae 2005–6; Coarelli 2014: 303; *contra* Ridley 2020. Rossini (2006) prefers the orthodox identification with Sextus Appuleius, consul in 29.



FIGURE 1.1 Gems of Solon and Dioscorides.

Source: E. Visconti (1818): vol. 1, pl. 12.4–5

Marble busts of an anonymous man and woman found in Arezzo and conveniently labelled “Maecenas” and “Terentia”, are now installed in the Museo Gaio Cilnio Mecenate.⁶³ Outside, near the ruins of an ancient amphitheatre, stands a portrait bust with broad features and high forehead.⁶⁴ The original was excavated on the Via Flaminia in 1830 and identified as Maecenas on the basis of resemblance to the Dioscorides ring, before being consigned to the seventeenth century. Now it languishes in the storerooms of Palazzo dei Conservatori, but several copies were made by Danish sculptor Bertil Thorvaldsen: one presented to the Grand Duke of Tuscany and placed in Petrarch’s House in Arezzo; another given to the King of Naples and deposited in the Borbonico Museum, now the Museo Archeologico. A third found its way into the art collection of Paul McCartney and George Harrison’s alma mater, the Liverpool Institute, but has not been seen since the school’s collection was auctioned in 1992.⁶⁵ Later, we will follow a fourth replica to rural Ireland and see it reanimated in a new context.

Ancient paintings of Maecenas, unsurprisingly, are even rarer. A fresco found on the Palatine, then lost, but preserved in an engraving in George Turnbull’s *Treatise on Ancient Painting* (1740),

63. Andrae 2005: 134–40.

64. A nineteenth-century copy; Faralli (2019) gives the history of its installation. André (1967: 10) detects “a broad hairless forehead, deep-set eyes, pursed lips and a contemptuous set to the mouth”.

65. On the bust’s reception, see the report of Dr Charles Bryce (above, n. 59). Tiffen (1935, pl. 8) provides a photo of the bust in situ. School historian Jim Lycett has kindly shared his boyhood memories (which include crashing into the bust and rocking it on its plinth).



FIGURE 1.2 Possible figure of Maecenas, Ara Pacis, Rome.
Source: Wikimedia Commons; photo: Saliko

depicts a tight huddle of figures, which contemporaries interpreted as a laurel-wreathed Augustus holding out a diadem to a subject king (perhaps Phraates of Parthia), with Maecenas the balding robed figure in the centre, Agrippa at his ear and Horace wrapping an arm around his shoulder.⁶⁶ In later eras, Maecenas was painted in many guises. He is a wreathed patron dispensing gold coins to a recumbent female in Dutch Golden Age painter Gerard de Laireesse's *Gaius Maecenas Supporting the Arts* (1690s); a swarthy impresario in Giambattista Tiepolo's *Maecenas Presenting the Liberal Arts* (1743); a tonsured swami listening to Virgil reciting in Charles-François Jalabert's neo-classical *Horace, Virgil and Varius at the House of Maecenas* (1846); and a balding gangster-king in Fedor Andreevich Bronnikov's *Horace Reading His Satires to Maecenas* (1863). In Jean-Auguste-Dominique

66. Turnbull 1740: pl. 3. This discovery inspired Wicar's portrait of Maecenas (Missirini 1835: 11).



FIGURE 1.3 Gerard de Lairesse, *Gaius Maecenas Supporting the Arts* (1690s), National Museum, Warsaw.

Source: Wikimedia Commons; photo: Wilczyński Krzysztof

Ingres's *Virgil Reading the "Aeneid" before Augustus, Livia and Octavia* (1812), Agrippa and Maecenas are conspiratorial figures in the shadows.⁶⁷

It is thanks to the vagueness of the ancient record that these various visualizations are possible. We will never know whether Maecenas was fat or thin, tall or short, fair or dark. The focus in antiquity was not on his face but on his style: rings and ringlets, swishing skirts, poultices, ointments, and oriental perfumes like myrrh and sandalwood. Nature was clearly less important for his memory than culture and the arts of care. To complicate matters, his sartorial choices are hard to separate from the bodily metaphors in which the

67. In Jean-Baptiste Wicar's similar painting, *Virgil Reading the "Aeneid" to Augustus* (1819–21, Villa Carlotta, Tremezzo), the collector and commissioner of many of the Villa's artworks, Giovanni Battista Sommariva, plays a mild, concerned Maecenas to Napoleon's Agrippa.

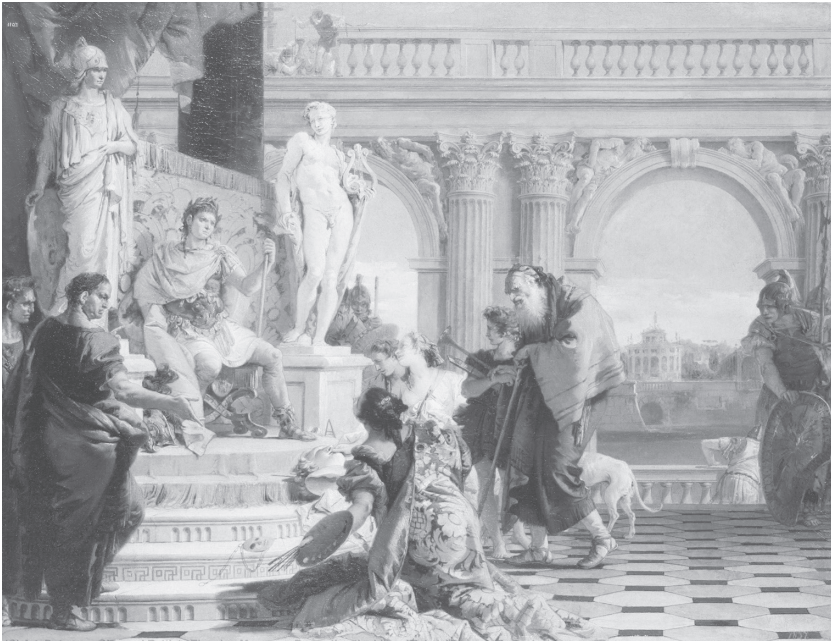


FIGURE 1.4 Giambattista Tiepolo, *Maecenas Presenting the Liberal Arts* (1743), Hermitage, Saint Petersburg.
Source: Wikimedia Commons



FIGURE 1.5 François Jalabert, *Horace, Virgil and Varius at the House of Maecenas* (1846), Musée des Beaux Arts, Nîmes.
Source: Wikimedia Commons



FIGURE 1.6 Fedor Andreevich Bronnikov, *Horace Reading His Satires to Maecenas* (1863), Odessa Art Museum.

Source: Wikiart; photo: mabrndt



FIGURE 1.7 Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Virgil Reading the "Aeneid" before Augustus, Livia and Octavia* (1812), Musée des Augustins, Toulouse.

Source: Wikimedia Commons; photo: Daniel Martin

Romans couched literary taste and mannerisms.⁶⁸ When Horace praises Maecenas for not being a snob about his social origins—“You do not dangle me from a hooked nose”—there is no way to tell whether that nose belongs, or does not belong, to him, regardless of his liberal social attitude.⁶⁹ In any case, as the poet Cesare Caporali wrote in his *terza rima* skit *Vita di Mecenate* (1604), this hardly constitutes sensational information:

Mecenate era un' uomo, che aveva il naso
Gli occhi e la bocca, come abbiamo noi,
Fatti dalla Natura, e non dal caso.
Si dilettaua aver due gambe, e doi
Piedi da camminare, e aver due mani,
Da farsi da se stesso i suoi fatti.

(CAPORALI, *VITA DI MECENATE* [1762 = 2018]: 1–6)

Maecenas was a man who had a nose, eyes and mouth, like the rest of us, created by nature, not by chance. He rejoiced in having two legs, and two feet for walking, and two hands, to do his business all by himself.

If it signifies anything, Maecenas's nose in Horace is a traditional metaphor for the patron or literary consumer's powers of discrimination. Fastidious features and fastidious tastes have blended into one indissoluble personality.

For all that, Horace (short and portly, by his own account) leaves us with strong physical impressions of an aquiline, smooth and towering presence. One of Maecenas's poetic fragments begins with a Catullan expression of devotion:⁷⁰

ni te uisceribus meis, Horati,
plus iam diligo, tu tuum sodalem,
hinnulo uideas strigosior

(2L = 3C = 186H; H PRINTED HERE]

If I don't love you, Horace, more than my own guts [or offspring], may you see your comrade scaggier than a little mule

“Quite the opposite of how we might imagine Maecenas' normal appearance” is how one modern editor defines *strigosior* (stringier, scaggier). He adds that he imagines Maecenas more similar to Horace's Epicurean self-portrait in

68. Bramble 1974.

69. Hor. *Sat.* 1.6.1–5. Bernardi Perini (1966–67), for one, is convinced.

70. *hinnulo* is Oudendorp's conjecture for MS *nimio*.

Epistles 1.4: “plump and sleek with a well-cured hide.”⁷¹ But since Maecenas is describing an unfulfilled condition (in this case, that he might ever *not love* Horace), we cannot infer anything about his actual physique. Such assumptions are a direct consequence of the poets’ tendency to include detailed self-portraits in their works, which readers then modify to fit the patronal addressee, as part of a general phenomenon of back-reflection. If the physical Maecenas is conceived as being a bit taller, a bit sleeker, a bit more effeminate than Horace, this impression, as we will see, is conditioned by ethnic and gender stereotypes and the aura of wealth. Equally to blame is the poet’s typical oscillation (on which more in the next chapter) between identifying with a patron and marking his difference, as someone more socially elevated or more discriminating.

In short, Maecenas functions as a chameleon, a dummy board to be inserted wherever it is needed to make a contrast. He is the mysterious *tertium quid* that alters the chemistry of any existing relationship.⁷² His personality shifts according to whether it is seen in relation to Augustus or Agrippa, or to the poets themselves. Rather than trying to reconstruct him, we should ask how and why his literary portraits are so contradictory (sometimes camouflaged, sometimes flamboyant) and what kinds of mutation they allowed. Why did Maecenas’s reputation fluctuate so drastically between his own era and the next? Why was he transformed in the space of two generations from a role model and intimate friend into a despicable, abject figure? How can he split into Petronius and Nero, and Trimalchio and Jay Gatsby, stand for exquisite taste one moment and flagrant vulgarity the next? The debate over ethics played its part: some notions of Roman civility accommodated enjoyment and luxury, others did not.⁷³ Opinions also shifted according to historical perspective, whether Maecenas was seen as a standard-bearer for a certain climactic moment in Roman civilization (the Augustan Age), as a relic of earlier, degenerate civilizations, or even as a forerunner of future decline.⁷⁴ His life, like his style, is often imagined as being out of step with his time: happening either too soon or too late.⁷⁵

Where Maecenas’s imagined poetic “circle” is concerned, it is often a sense of inclusion or exclusion that determines whether he is admired or resented. On the inside, in the minority, are the poets whose self-worth is reinforced by this great friend’s acceptance. On the outside, the unprivileged majority—whether

71. Hor. *Epist.* 1.4.15 (“pinguem et nitidum bene curata cute”); Hollis 2007: 321–22. Horace as short: Hor. *Sat.* 2.3.308–9; as tubby: Suet. *Vita Hor.*

72. Cf. Henderson (1998b: 170) on “Menalcas-Maecenas” in Calpurnius Siculus: “The *tertium quid*, the presently absent motor of the poetic plots”.

73. Edwards 1993: 173–206.

74. The title of Sklenář’s 2017 *Plant of a Strange Vine* (on Seneca’s Maecenas) alludes to the degenerate plant at Jeremiah 2:21.

75. On anachronism as a feature of dandyism, see Gelder (2007: 123).

in Maecenas's own time or in later eras—who devalue him and his nest of pampered cronies. For their part, the poets construct Maecenas as unreachable, exaggerating their own achievement in being close to him. Everyone else, contemporary or post-Augustan, sees him from the outside looking in: shielded in his study, curtained carriage, shady garden or impregnable palace.⁷⁶ Virgil and Horace speak from a position of tight-lipped mutual dependence. Horace says, “It was important for me that you singled me out, you who can tell real from fake.” Virgil calls Maecenas “deservedly the greatest part of my fame.”⁷⁷ Yet Maecenas is startlingly minimized in their poetry.

It is, frankly, in the poets' interests not to give away too much. Their Maecenas is a fetishized commodity, carefully guarded, sparingly revealed—conspicuous by his absence, or at least never more than a silent presence, like the non-speaking actor in a Greek tragedy.⁷⁸ Blanks in the record screen him from capture by rivals, biographers and literary critics alike, which only enhances the value of any rare sighting. The story of encounters with the patron is a story of noises off. In the distance: the tinkle of music and the hum of conversation and laughter. Something beautiful, important and valuable is going on in the next room.⁷⁹ Dinner with Maecenas is a sought-after ticket, but the evening's secrets can never be relayed.⁸⁰ The desired object is kept out of reach; the mystification is the message. “What's life like with Maecenas?” (*Quomodo Maecenas tecum?*) is a question that only an enfant terrible can ask. In the mouth of the anonymous social climber who pesters Horace in *Satires* 1.9, it is both compulsive and unanswerable.⁸¹

The Perils of Softness

By contrast, post-Augustan biographies and commentaries offer an overload of small details, many of them scurrilous, to fill the void. One trait stands out: *mollitia*, variously translatable as “softness”, “effeteness” or “effeminacy”.⁸² Spanning physique, sexual behaviour, and diplomatic and literary style, this functions as a virtual algorithm for generating Maecenas's biography,

76. Study: *Hor. Sat.* 1.3.63–65; carriage: *Hor. Sat.* 2.6.42; garden: *Eleg. in Maec.* 1.33–34; palace: *Hor. Sat.* 1.9.49, 54–58.

77. *Hor. Sat.* 1.6.62–63; *Verg. G.* 2.40.

78. See Labate (2005: 48–49) on Maecenas as tragic mute, alluding to Cicero's perception of his role in his own dialogues (*Att.* 13.19.3).

79. Cf. the title of Stefan Bakalowicz's 1890 painting (figure 1.8): *In Maecenas' Reception Room*.

80. *Hor. Sat.* 2.7.32–37.

81. *Hor. Sat.* 1.9.43; Dufallo 2015.

82. Edwards 1993: 63–97; C. Williams 2010: 137–76.



FIGURE 1.8 Stefan Bakalowicz, *In Maecenas' Reception Room* (1890), Pavlovsk Museum, Saint Petersburg.

Source: Wikimedia Commons

especially when defined against “harder” individuals like Augustus and Agrippa.⁸³ It is softness that automatically produces the eunuchs, the feather beds, the heated swimming pools, the debilitating enslavement to both a wife and a male mime actor, even Augustus’s risqué nickname, *malagma moecharum* (amalgamating softness and Greekness). It is also what predicts Maecenas’s erotic susceptibility and his passivity as an accommodating cuckold who lent his wife to Augustus.⁸⁴

None of this is to say that his softness made Maecenas unique. In Roman Republican invective, *mollis* was ubiquitous as a slur against male opponents, when Latin *uirtus* derives from *uir*, “man” (thus normalizing the supremacy of *male* virtue), and when masculinity was conceived of as a fragile, acquired condition that needed to be maintained across all aspects of behaviour, from

83. Bourdieu (1984: 546–60) describes a 1970s parlour game where participants were asked to match contemporary politicians to people or objects. The items associated with Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber (narcissus, hairdresser, grasshopper, Porsche, Brigitte Bardot, sofa, straw boater) reinforced his identity as racy and lightweight—and distinct from solid rival Valéry Giscard d’Estaing (oak tree, Rolls Royce, Queen of England, top hat).

84. Dio 54.19.3; Plut. *Mor.* 207c.

gesture to dress to speech.⁸⁵ Seneca's blistering demonization of Maecenas's unmanliness in *Epistle* 114 has been seen productively in the context of Stoic beliefs about restraint, "holding together" (Latin *tenor*/Greek *tonos*), a quality that should manifest itself in every aspect of a Roman male's behaviour, from his sexual activity to his metaphors.⁸⁶ Each aspect of deviancy predicts the next one: flowing womanly robes implies corrupt sexual behaviour implies incoherent writing style.⁸⁷ Maecenas's prose and clothes alike are "diffuse, lacking in cohesiveness".⁸⁸ If, according to a well-known definition, ancient manhood was an achieved state that "remained fluid and incomplete until firmly anchored by the discipline of an acculturative process", then Maecenas was a staggering underachiever.⁸⁹ If Roman masculinity was "a house of cards", where if just one card was dislodged the whole precarious edifice toppled, then Seneca's biography makes all the cards go down at once.⁹⁰

Even so, it is too simple to assume that *mollitia* was a wholly negative quality in Rome or that Seneca is exclusively responsible for Maecenas's effeminate reputation. Writing about Roman elegy, the self-abasing genre that signals its difference from epic and history, real men and conventional power dynamics, Duncan Kennedy invokes Maecenas as a living paradigm of softness, rightly pointing to the acceptability of effeteness as a marker of civility, humanity, refinement and social distinction in many places and eras.⁹¹ Even in puritanical Rome, Maecenas might be considered an example of "*mollitia* successfully lived". Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's observations of upper-class behaviour in twentieth-century France, Kennedy comments: "Accusations of *mollitia* need not have done [Maecenas] social harm even in a society in which masculinity was apparently so aligned with superiority as in the Roman, and he can be represented as having appropriated the discourse of *mollitia* to his own benefit."⁹² It is not clear whether Kennedy thinks that Maecenas was consciously "camp" or "limp-wristed" or just constructed as such by others. Nor

85. C. Williams 2010: 137–76.

86. Graver 1998: 621–23.

87. Graver 1998: 620. Again, not exclusive to Maecenas: cf. Dion. Hal. *Comp.* 4.11 on Lydian rhetorician Hegesias of Magnesia's "precious, degenerate, effeminate [malthakon] way of arranging words".

88. Graver 1998: 619.

89. Gleason 1995: 59, 81.

90. C. Williams 2010: 156.

91. Kennedy 1993: 31; Edwards 1993: 67–68. Under the Abbasid rulers, lovesickness was positively encouraged as a civilizing process for young courtiers (Algazi and Drory 2000).

92. Kennedy 1993: 39; see Bourdieu (1984: 380) on "real men's" disdain for personal care or mollycoddling.

who those others were: perhaps not the socially inferior, in this case, but the more morally conventional. Softness, in short, was a contentious concept across all ancient moral discourse, not a purely negative one. It could even be a corollary of power. The fountain of Salmacis in Halicarnassus (modern Bodrum in Turkey), rumoured to unman those who swam in it, was heralded by its citizens as a civilizing and emollient source that marked their proud status as a Hellenized colony.⁹³

One crucial factor is that the poets who enlisted Maecenas in their dedications had their own interests in celebrating this trait. To them, “soft” was nothing less than a defiant, self-ironizing badge of identity (much as “queer” is today), a label for literary or countercultural alternatives to conventionally masculine themes—world domination, size, power and authority—along with their literary equivalent, a mythical, essential version of martial epic.⁹⁴ Most Augustan poets performed the rhetorical gesture now known as *recusatio*, a formal refusal on grounds of weakness to produce the grand, glorifying or comprehensive poetry supposedly demanded by their patron.⁹⁵ Instead, they rebelled by siding with more delicate forms of expression, like elegy and lyric. Maecenas presided sternly over these refusals as the bearer of Augustus’s demands for some military monolith, but often ended up exposed as an undercover collaborator. After all, what better role model for refusal to oblige than someone whose defining political act was his rejection of traditional career paths?⁹⁶ What more appropriate mascot for soft poetry than a man whose softness was his defining characteristic? Or should the phenomenon be looked at the other way around? Were Maecenas’s attributes enhanced by the poets in their own image, so that “weak” decisions (the refusal to write epic, in particular) could be endorsed by someone whose sympathetic weakness was underpinned by significant power, soft but real?

Paradoxical Personalities

In the next chapter, I consider Maecenas’s role as patron against the long history of ancient poetic patronage. For now, my focus is on the other roles (social, political and diplomatic) that made him such a versatile figure in Roman

93. Ov. *Met.* 4.285–87; Strabo 14.2.16; Vitruvius 2.8.12. See Lloyd-Jones 1999; Nugent 1990; Sourvinou-Inwood 2004; Gagné 2006.

94. Hinds 2000.

95. On literary *recusatio*, see pp. 74–76 below, Wehrli (1944: 69–76), Wimmel (1960), Race (1978) and D’Anna (1997). On emperors’ parallel refusals of honours, see Wallace-Hadrill (1982: 37) and Freudenburg (2014).

96. Zetzel 1982.

ethical and cultural discourse, particularly in relation to Augustus and the Augustan regime. The portraits or fragments that we have are not just minibiographies of a singular personality: they are interventions in a broader debate about the merits of consistency versus many-sidedness and about the proper limits of pleasure in a life lived well.⁹⁷ And here we have the first of many paradoxes. This singular individual turns out to be a variant on a deeply entrenched cultural stereotype: the so-called “mixed” or “paradoxical” personality.

The paradoxical portrait is an ancient cliché with deep roots.⁹⁸ Traces can be seen in figures as diverse as Socrates, with his ugly exterior and beautiful interior, and Hannibal, who started heroically but burned out too soon.⁹⁹ Gods and demigods could be paradoxical, too, especially those enlisted in the *Elegiae* to vindicate Maecenas’s “soft” behaviour—beefy Hercules, doing time as wool-spinning slave to Lydian Queen Omphale, and androgynous Bacchus, hot from war in India, carousing with his maenads and satyrs: “O Bacchus, after we conquered the dark-skinned Indians, you drank sweet wine from your helmet, and in your carefree hour your robes flowed loose—at that moment I believe you wore two robes, both brightly coloured.”¹⁰⁰

From the late Republic on, these historiographical vignettes feature able and efficient statesmen whose private leisure or passions threatened, if unchecked, to compromise their public performance. From Sulla to Catiline, Sallustius Crispus to Otho, brief lives form interludes at the middle or end of a historical narrative. Just as the suicide chamber to which paradoxical characters like Plato’s Socrates or Tacitus’s Petronius retreated offered definitive freedom of expression, a final summing-up, in the last moments of life, so these memorable cameos provide a space in which to contemplate an individual’s freedom to tear up behavioural stereotypes.¹⁰¹ Often, regret is expressed that the protagonist defaulted on his early promise: according to Sallust, Catiline might have done something great.¹⁰² Seneca grudgingly concedes (*Ep.* 92.35) that Maecenas wrote a few manly hexameter lines with neat caesuras, “high-belted” ones; he had talent “both ambitious and masculine”, which was “loosened”, “unbelted”, by good fortune. A consistent feature is the idea of sapped potential, sabotaged by luxury or weakness. Individuals’ lives track the overarching narrative of

97. Aigner-Foresti 1996, La Penna 1981. Cicero was criticized (*Sen. Controv.* 2.4.4) for lack of *constantia*. On the debate about behavioural and artistic consistency, see Möller (2004).

98. La Penna 1976.

99. *Pl. Symp.* 215a4–222b7; *Livy* 21.3.6, 21.10.4.

100. *Eleg. in Maec.* 1.57–60.

101. Haynes 2010.

102. *Sall. Cat.* 5.5: “uastus animus immoderata, incredibilia, nimis alta semper cupiebat” (his expansive soul always desired the excessive, the implausible, the too ambitious).

world history: great cities undermined by moral failure. Only the gods find it effortless to keep their multiple identities in balance.

The paradoxical portrait, it has been argued, is a peculiarly Roman phenomenon.¹⁰³ Frustratingly, Maecenas never qualified for one of Plutarch's parallel Greek and Roman lives. Still, it is interesting to speculate about a hypothetical Greek counterpart. One important precedent must be Alcibiades, whose biography was distilled by Plutarch from a mass of earlier testimony into a masterpiece of paradox.¹⁰⁴ This androgynous figure carried a shield with a figure of Eros on it (*Alc.* 16.2), wore trailing purple robes in the agora (16.1), touted his promiscuous favours around the East, was well-preserved at forty but died a Dorian Gray, wearing rouge applied by a prostitute (39.2). He was an ephemeral Adonis (the herms were mutilated during the Adonia; Tissaphernes even created a garden named "Alcibiades," 24.5); a chameleon (23.4) who adapted his personality to each new lover, each new city-state, from Sparta to Persia; a flower that wasted its fruit (4.1). "They love him and hate him, and cannot do without him," says an Aristophanic character of the Athenian people, while Archestratus pronounced: "Greece can only take one Alcibiades."¹⁰⁵ For all the obvious differences, the two portraits share similar elements: erotics, luxury, Eastern tyranny, adaptability, ephemerality, fruit and gardens, decay, and pampered exceptionality. Other striking precedents for Maecenas include Agathon, both the elegant host of Plato's *Symposium* and the effeminate, parasol-carrying poet of Aristophanes's *Thesmophoriazusae*, as well as Agathon's Roman equivalent, the mincing orator Hortensius, whose precocious talent, according to Cicero, withered prematurely.¹⁰⁶

On closer inspection, most of the qualities ascribed to Maecenas have parallels in other biographies. Accusations of effeminacy flood Roman Republican invective: not even Julius Caesar, Cicero, Pompey or Octavian escaped unscathed.¹⁰⁷ The "mixed personality" tout court had recently been exemplified by Lucullus, with his war medals on the one hand and his fishponds, dining rooms and Babylonian gardens on the other.¹⁰⁸ Less sustainable contradictions are found in Antony, an exceptional soldier brought low by luxury, drink

103. La Penna 1976.

104. Plut. *Alc.* J. Griffin 1977: 21; Alcibiades and Eros: Wohl 1999, 2002: 124–70. The character Alcibiades in Plato's *Symposium* (216a) claims a life split between politics and philosophy.

105. Ar. *Frogs* 1425; Plut. *Alc.* 16.8.

106. Agathon: Snyder 1974, Muecke 1982; Hortensius: Cic. *Brut.* 317.

107. C. Williams 2010: 61, 88, 191–92, 212, 237.

108. Lucullus's gardens: Broise and Jolivet 1998; Tac. *Ann.* 11.1, Frontin. *Aq.* 1.22. Luxurious living: Cic. *Sest.* 93, *Leg.* 3.30–31; Vell. Pat. 2.33.4; Plin. *HN* 8.211; Plut. *Luc.* 39; Swain 1992; Tröster 2008, ch. 3; Jolivet 1987.

and female domination.¹⁰⁹ Maecenas's reputation for political mildness and restraint can be traced back to Pericles of Athens.¹¹⁰ Another affable, wealthy man, Cicero's alter ego Atticus, managed to be "everyone's friend", even when challenged by the special circumstances of civil war.¹¹¹

In turn, Maecenas offered a model to his imperial successors and a template for historians to ponder and reapply. In Tacitus's view, the Tiberian statesman Sallustius Crispus specifically "emulated Maecenas", not just in limiting his ambition for office but also in combining political vigour and private relaxation in a modern, suspiciously controlled way, as this subtle "puzzle-portrait" suggests:

Crispus was of equestrian descent and grandson of a sister of Caius Sallustius, that most prolific Roman historian, who adopted him and gave him his name. Though he soon gained access to offices, he emulated Maecenas, and without rising to a senator's rank overtook in power many who had won triumphs and consulships. He differed from old school manners in his elegance and refinement, and in his wealth and affluence he verged on luxury [diuersus a ueterum instituto per cultum et munditias copiaque et affluentia luxu propior]. But beneath all this was a vigorous mind, equal to important business, all the sharper for looking somnolent and apathetic. (Tac. *Ann.* 3.30)

Another *bon viveur* was Lucius Piso, who slept off his hangovers in the morning but served Augustus and Tiberius responsibly in the afternoon.¹¹² But the most exquisite variation on the theme is Tacitus's description of Petronius's deceptively casual suicide.¹¹³ It is tempting to extract from Maecenas's literary fragments a nonchalant approach to life: "nec curo" (I don't care), "benest" (it's all good), "nec . . . quaero" (nor do I want).¹¹⁴ Yet along with misplaced frivolity in serious contexts, he sometimes displays odd intensity in trivial ones ("If I didn't love you, Horace, more than my own guts").¹¹⁵

He also spawned less acceptable acolytes. While decadence and sensuality were traditionally attributed to Greece and places further east, later Greek sources suggest that the streets of imperial Rome were positively crawling with

109. J. Griffin 1977.

110. Swan 2004 *ad* Dio 55.7.1 compares Thuc. 2.65, 2.59.3.

111. Graverini 2006: 64–66; Nep., *Att.* 6.2. Cf. Dio 55.7.4 on Maecenas's likeability.

112. Sen. *Ep.* 83.9–10.

113. See pp. 284–88 below.

114. 6L = 8C = 191H; 1L = 4C = 187H; 3L = 2C = 185H. At Sen. *Ben.* 4.36.2, Maecenas is quoted as saying "I shall not be held accountable for 100,000 sesterces."

115. Quintilian (9.4.28) complains of 16L: "The word-order is playful in a grim context" (in re tristi ludit compositio).

Maecenases. The Jewish historian Philo spreads scare stories about an epidemic of purple-clothed “men-women” (androgynoi) virtually volunteering for castration (*On the Special Laws*, 3.40–41). In the speech written for her by Dio in the third century BCE, Boudicca denounces the Romans as “those men (if we can call them men) who bathe in warm water, eat artificial dainties, drink unmixed wine, anoint themselves with myrrh, sleep on soft couches with over-age boys for bedfellows and are slaves to a lyre-player [Nero], and a poor one at that” (62.6.4). With the Romans defined ironically here in terms of their traditional opposites, Maecenas and his type remained no less of an outrage. But the counterarguments we have already seen, that “loose” private behaviour was a sign of refinement or a rounded life, suggest that the debate was ongoing and that more flexible models of *Romanitas* had long been in circulation.

Critically, history’s verdict on Maecenas hinges on how well he was judged to have maintained the divisions in his life between business and leisure, duty and relaxation, or how well he used his private time.¹¹⁶ The effective leader who sank into leisure in his spare time would become crucial for shaping a new ideal of the imperial courtier and statesman.¹¹⁷ During the Republic, strange beasts like Catiline, who slept by day and went to business at night, were suspected of tyrannical aspirations. Under the Empire, visible indolence, cast as *luxuria* or *otium*, had a reassuring political dimension. As well as promising a velvet-gloved style of operation, it indicated that its possessor was not in the running to become *princeps*.¹¹⁸ Such an alibi enhanced Maecenas’s reputation for harmlessness. At the same time, it ensured that he died in his bed.

This makes the algorithm that generates Maecenas’s paradoxical biography more complex than simply “softness”. Perhaps “hard-soft paradox”, instead? Maecenas’s public efficiency excused his private luxury, so long as the two did not flow into each other. Even within this framework, individual features attracted mixed interpretations. Take Maecenas’s notorious sleeplessness. Velleius makes him a vigilant public servant, who works all hours. Seneca, on the other hand, gives quite a different impression of the nocturnal Maecenas—tossing and turning on his feather bed, sick with sexual rejection and debauchery: “[Maecenas,] debilitated by self-indulgence and worn out by too much good fortune [uoluptatibus marcidum et felicitate nimia laborantem], was troubled more by the reason for his suffering than by the suffering itself.”¹¹⁹

116. La Penna 1981; Leppin 1992. Cic. *Brut.* 9 contrasts *inertia* and *desidia* with free time well spent (“oti moderati atque honesti”).

117. Woodman 1983: 240–44.

118. See Woodman 1983: 244; J. Griffin 1977: 21–23 = 1994: 38–40.

119. Sen. *Prov.* 3.10.

The simple act of going to bed and not sleeping makes Maecenas either an ever-watchful statesman or a tortured neurotic.¹²⁰

Where public service was concerned, Maecenas's tactful style tended to be rated positively, as a scaled-down version of (or inspiration for) imperial *clementia* (or, later, *indulgentia*). Cassius Dio tells us that he "not only made himself liked by Augustus . . . he also pleased everybody else" (55.7.4). The *Elegiae* praise his restrained use of his authority: "Although you had infinite power, thanks to your closeness to a great friend, no one ever felt you use that power."¹²¹ Even Seneca concedes: "His most praiseworthy feature was mercy: he spared the sword, he abstained from blood."¹²² Maecenas and Agrippa oversaw peace negotiations between Octavian and Antony (Plut. *Ant.* 59). In Horace's account of tagging along with Maecenas and other delegates in 37 BCE to seal a further peace treaty at Brundisium (*Sat.* 1.5), triumviral dissent is cosily domesticated into a squabble between friends, patched up by natural peacemakers.¹²³ Maecenas was also known for defusing the emperor's tantrums and putting him in a calmer mood, acting as a buffer between ruler and people.¹²⁴ The signature mildness is on display in an anecdote about Octavian's war crimes tribunals. Observing his friend handing down one death sentence after another, Maecenas pushed through the crowd and casually threw a tablet into his lap inscribed with the words "Time's up, executioner."¹²⁵ Still, "clemency" in a political context could easily slide into "softness" in a personal one: "non mitem sed mollem" (not mild, but soft), in Seneca's crisp formulation (*Ep.* 92.35).

The Flow of Pleasure

Restrained at court, to the point of being invisible, Maecenas was positively flagrant in his pursuit of pleasure. Seneca regards him as synonymous with every kind of sybaritic delight:

120. André (1967: 76) reads sleeplessness as a physiological "symptom" of Maecenas's deployment of night police (*vigiles urbani*, established 6 CE); cf. Dio 52.24.6; *Eleg. in Maec.* 1.14; cf. Sall. *Cat.* 5 (Catiline's superhuman contempt for sleep).

121. *Eleg. in Maec.* 1.15–16.

122. Sen. *Ep.* 114.7.

123. Hor. *Sat.* 1.5.29 "auersos soliti componere amicos"; cf. App. *B Civ.* 5.64 on the peace-lords (Cocceius, Pollio and Maecenas) who promoted universal "friendship".

124. Longinus's description (*Peri hupsous* 32.5; cf. Pl. *Ti.* 70) of the lungs as a "soft [malakēn], bloodless, porous cushion [malagma] between the hot angry heart and the rest of the body" nicely suggests the buffer role played by the "married woman's mattress". See Graverini (1999) on Maecenas as diplomat and engineer of the *pax Augusta*.

125. Dio 55.7.2; Bauman 1982: 102–10.

It is consistency that lasts; falseness does not. Some men are like Vatinius or Cato, by turns; sometimes they don't think Curius is stern enough, or Fabricius poor enough, or Tubero frugal enough and content with simple things; at other times, they vie with Licinus in wealth, Apicius in dining and Maecenas in pleasure-seeking [Maecenatem deliciis]. The greatest proof of an evil mind is unsteadiness and continual wavering between the simulation of virtue and the love of vice. (*Ep.* 120.1.19–20)

In this tirade against behavioural inconsistency, Maecenas is ironically identified with a single quality: *deliciae*, “delights”. The word signifies not just pleasurable amusements, such as love affairs, but also a favourite pet or toy boy, or in a literary context one's pet rhetorical tropes or figures (Seneca uses the word of Maecenas's literary “darlings” in *Ep.* 114).¹²⁶ It often has an intimate or naughty feel. Catullus is fond of it, despite the double stigma involved, and uses the word in both subjective and objective senses: “The negative associations of the word . . . include the implication of effeminacy that to the Roman mind goes with any form of nonpurposive or nonessential activity. . . . [T]o call someone your *deliciae* is to point in two opposite directions, to the object and to oneself, and it is also to mark one's behavior, quite self-consciously, as questionable.”¹²⁷

For all his disapproval, Seneca gives Maecenas a lasting place in the history of the senses, as someone so perversely hypersensitive that his pleasures were often indistinguishable from torture and pain. In the ancient world, yielding to pleasure was imagined as an intense physiological experience, a chemical process of osmosis between inside and outside.¹²⁸ Suspended in a state of heightened sensibility, Maecenas's body seems to melt into boneless pulp and feverish flux; his membranes become porous and dissolve; external pleasures seep into marrow and muscles.¹²⁹ Corporeal metaphors characterizing his manner as “loose”, “soft” or “fibreless” are reflected in the symbolic markers of his physique, environment, writing and costume: flowing robes, tossing neck, unfettered gait and liquid, wandering style.¹³⁰

126. Cic. *Orat.* 39 (“deliciis uel potius ineptiis”). See also Pomeroy 1992; Graver 1998: 616; Sen. *Ep.* 114.7.

127. W. Fitzgerald 1995: 36. Bayet (1956: 20) notes the etymological link with *delicere*, “seduce”.

128. Seneca, *De vita beata* 5.4: “pleasure flows round [circumfundatur] on every side and seeps [influxat] through every opening”; Edwards 1993: 173, 175.

129. Sen. *Ep.* 114.25: “luxurious habits descend into the marrow and sinews”.

130. Sen. *Ep.* 114 turns Maecenas's idiosyncrasies into generalities: “The speech of a pampered man is soft and fluid” (21); “The soul's functions and actions grow limp and any impulse comes from a weak and fluid source” (23). Cf. Polemo on the androgynous orator (Gleason

The same language of high temperature, rapid ripening and excessive fluidity marks Maecenas's erotic entanglements. As Tacitus puts it, he "overflowed into passion for" or "went all soppy over" the mime actor Bathyllus (*Ann.* 1.54: "effuso in amorem Bathylli"), a passion that Augustus indulged by instituting a popular dramatic festival. In the Tacitean context, *amor* ("passion") might simply indicate exuberant fandom (as in the gangs of supporters who favoured Bathyllus or his rival Pylades), not personal obsession.¹³¹ But similar terms are used by Horace in his *Epodes* of the lovesickness he and Maecenas experience together; metaphors of burning and stewing (*arsisse, ureris, macerat*) suggest a steady boiling down of masculine muscle ("like a long soak in a hot tub").¹³² Seneca, meanwhile, describes the operations of unlimited pleasure and consistent good fortune on Maecenas as premature "decay" ("wasting away in the pursuit of pleasure [*marcidum uoluptatibus*] and ground down by excessive good fortune") tantamount to castration: "if good fortune had not snipped his sinews, or, to be blunt, castrated him [*castrasset*]." ¹³³

With a curious symmetry, again, Maecenas's fractured literary corpus offers matching glimpses of loose or flaccid bodies, from the tossing head (*flexibile caput*) of the castrated followers of the Phrygian goddess Cybele (in his effete galliambics) to the floppy neck (*ceruice lassa*) of the "tyrants of the grove" (in a prose quotation) and the limp, quivering physique of a hunchback, captured in what Seneca calls "effeminate" verse (actually, Priapeans): "Make me weak in my hands, make me weak and lame in my feet. / Heap up a crooked hump on my back, shake my teeth till they rattle."¹³⁴ Pliny's account, allegedly derived from Maecenas and Agrippa, of the dropsy Augustus suffered while hiding in marshland during the civil wars ("aqua subter cutem fusa turgidi" [swollen with the water that seeped under his skin], *HN* 7.148), is curiously reminiscent of Seneca on Maecenas's porous body.

1995: 63): "His head is tilted to the side, his loins do not hold still, and his slack limbs never stay in one position." Cramer (2000) terms such popular connections between physical symptoms and sexuality "folk-endocrinology".

131. For the public performance of infatuation by the powerful, cf. Plut. *Alex.* 67: Alexander kissing his favourite eunuch Bagoas in the theatre; Vout (2007: 52–135) on Hadrian and Antinous.

132. McDermott 1982: 220. In Hor. *Epod.* 14, "debilitating lassitude" (*mollis inertia*) "has dripped" (*diffuderit*) oblivion into the poet's lovesick heart. Impotence in the *Epodes*: W. Fitzgerald 1988, Oliensis 1998: 64–101.

133. Sen. *Prov.* 3.10 (*marcidus* is from Proto-Indo-European *merk- "decay"); *Ep.* 19.9; cf. *Ep.* 114.23 *marcent*.

134. 4L = 5–6C = 188H; Sen. *Ep.* 114.5 = 11L; Sen. *Ep.* 101.11 = 1L = 4C = 187H ("debilem facito manu, debilem pede coxo, / tuber adstrue gibberum, lubricos quate dentes").

Vulnerability and lack of control—not just flow, but overflow—also identify Maecenas with what the Romans saw as a stereotypically feminine temperament. Velleius expresses the statesman’s transition from political action to leisure in terms of gender transgression as much as physical fluidity (“He sprawled in pampered ease, almost out-womaning women”). Seneca makes the hint more explicit: any man, he says, who would rather be Maecenas, the spoiled courtier, than Regulus, the resilient soldier, must ultimately long to be Maecenas’s wife Terentia (*Prov.* 3.10).¹³⁵ Such below-the-belt insinuations and hard-soft contrasts exploit ancient stereotypes of uncontrolled desire as constitutional in women and pathological in men. In Anne Carson’s words: “Greek men ascribe to the female in general a tendency to ‘let herself go’ in emotion or appetite, a tendency encouraged by her wet nature and by the liquid or liquefying nature of emotions and appetites themselves.”¹³⁶ Like Maecenas’s thermal diving pool, ancient desire immerses its subject in a fusion of liquid and heat: “*Erōs* pours, drips, heats, softens, melts, loosens, cooks, boils, dissolves.”¹³⁷

Etruscans and Lydians

Such concepts of “softness,” “looseness” or “fluidity” in Maecenas’s biographies turn out to be overdetermined, generated as much by ethnic stereotyping as by gender ambiguity or behavioural choice. The name “Maecenas” is Etruscan; his poets hail him as “descendant of Etruscan kings”.¹³⁸ It is unclear whether Maecenas himself initiated this pretentious claim, but it is likely enough, given how many other Roman aristocrats were busy tracing descent from the legendary Trojans who emigrated with Aeneas.¹³⁹ Contemporary interest is signalled by fake Etruscan “antiques”, such as the funerary urn of Volumnius or the Corsini Throne.¹⁴⁰ Even so, only a tiny minority of political players in Rome laid claim to “Etruscan” origins (a handful of families in the Republic and just a few more under the Empire).¹⁴¹ Sometimes they suppressed their origins by adopting Roman names; sometimes they suppressed their political ambitions. Maecenas

135. Cf. Beulé 1868: 280: “comme une femme de l’orient se rendant au bazar”.

136. Carson 1991: 156.

137. Carson 1991: 138. Cf. *ibid.* 155–56: “We encounter a deep and abiding mistrust of τὸ ὑγρὸν [the wet] in virtue of its ability to transform and deform.” Cf. Agathon at *Pl. Symp.* 195e–196a on the moist fluidity of *Eros*.

138. Hor. *Carm.* 1.1.1 (“Maecenas, ataus edite regibus”), 3.29.1 (“Tyrrhena regum progenies”); Prop. 3.9.1 (“eques Etrusco de sanguine regum”); *Eleg. in Maec.* 1.13 (“regis eras, Etrusce, genus”).

139. Erskine 2001.

140. Wiseman 1987; Erskine 2001: 21–24; Chillet 2016: 66.

141. Farney 2007: 125–50.

(continued...)

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