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Validating Epigram: Martial's Wish for a Maecenas

Changing attitudes towards literary pursuits during the late Republic and early Empire created an opportunity for Roman poets to declare hopes for remuneration in a frank manner that would have been unacceptable in previous times. It was not until the end of the republic that poetry as a serious pursuit caught on in aristocratic circles, particularly among equestrians with no interest in a political career. Compensation was too delicate a topic for a Virgil or a Horace to mention, and it is not until around the time of the Nero that Roman poets are clear regarding their expectations of patronage. This is when Maecenas becomes the ideal patron. This paper examines how Martial reflects the new social acceptability regarding remuneration for poetry and how he uses Maecenas' reputation as a discerning patron to implant a minor genre firmly in the mainstream of Roman readership.

Augustan poets employ symbols of friendship suggestive of patronage in poems to Maecenas, but they never state that they write for his favor or ask for support in exchange for poetry. By the time of Nero Roman poets on the periphery of the imperial court were as bold as Greek poets in their pleas for support, and they turned Maecenas into the model patron, that is, a man of substance who not only recognized and appreciated poetic talent, but also rewarded poets with gifts and support that allowed them to pursue a literary career without the distractions of poverty (cf. Calp. Sic. *Ecl.* 4.158-163; *Laus Pis.* 230-248).

Martial refers to Maecenas' role as patron five times (1.107; 7.29; 8.55(56); 11.3; 12.3(4)), connecting him to the same poets (Virgil, Varius, and Horace) named by Neronian court poets as lucky benefactors of Maecenas' generosity in poems that request similar remuneration. In addition to pleas for support, however, Martial uses Maecenas as part of his effort to elevate epigram and make it a genre suitable for serious poetic expression. He may be not writing anything of the magnitude of an *Aeneid*, but a wise patron will recognize the value of his epigrams, as Maecenas recognized the value of Virgil's epic, Horace's lyrics, and Varius' tragedy.

Martial's reality is that he must deal with a host of lukewarm patrons, as evidenced by the multitude of aristocrats courted—not always successfully—in his poems. He plays to the desire of the elite for literature that mentions them favorably by name and enhances their profile in the right aristocratic circles. Martial's vehicle for praise, however, is a minor genre with origins in inscription and a recent reputation as a medium suited to private jokes, slander, and anecdotes. In his talented hands, epigram becomes substantial enough even for the extended praise of the Emperor. When Martial pines for a Maecenas, he pines for a type of patronage that he in fact helps to idealize while energizing a genre generally considered a Greek specialty or amateur sport.