

Poet and Patron in Ancient Rome

The paper examines

- A. the importance of patronage versus institutional support
- B. the current research on the topic, especially that of Peter White and the historians
- C. Horace as a *cliens* - but one who distanced himself from his patron so he could retain his autonomy as an artist

A. Patronage was important in ancient Rome because there was not then the kind of institutional support available now, when a poet may be a teacher at a college to pay his bills or may receive endowment funding while s/he writes.

Our literature now is intended mainly for the eyes (readers), but Roman literature was intended for the ears (listeners at symposia, public festivals, public readings). The book trade was relatively late and copyright laws did not exist. What's more, the Romans deemed mercenary activity (taking money for your work) un-Roman (which is why lawyers like Cicero were - officially at least- unpaid).

So, a poet needed a patron for financial support. Besides, poets were considered craftsmen and the elite at Rome (your potential audience) were not normally poets, though some, like Sallust, might write history, but that was a public service (and not for pay). Poetry was justifiable to Romans if it celebrated your *virtus* (a concern of the elite) and brought *gloria* to you and, thus, to your ancestors. (Cf. Cicero's defense of Archias, in which he praises literature as ennobling the past.)

There was no regular governmental support (other than for the dramatic festivals - for which the author could earn some money) as there had been in Greece. And the audience for serious literature at Rome may have been very limited. A literacy level sufficient to appreciate a Horatian ode was not wide-spread, because primary education was not wide-spread (senators, knights and well-to-do freedmen) and the number of books was limited. There was no popular literature. And even if reading was not required for a Roman literary audience, education (ability to understand what you heard) was, and here too the audience must have been small. So a writer needed private support.

B. Many current scholars maintain that patrons did not put pressure on their client-poets to conform, citing various recusationes in which poets say that they are not going to write the sort of poetry that their patrons have called for (e.g., epic rather than amatory). Peter White points out that patronage was as important for marriage (among other things) as for poetry, and that therefore poets were lumped together with all of the patron's other *clientes*. They would then have attended the morning *salutatio* and patronal recitations, accompanied the patron to the forum and on trips, given electoral support, etc. All a patron's *clientes* were called *amici* (friends), with no special terminology for poets. White notes that there was no regular salary paid to poets, just occasional gifts or *sinecures* - all part of the *domus* of a great man. All perhaps true, including even that all poets may have been *equites* (members of the middle class/business class), but they might well still have needed more money to maintain their lifestyle and the \$25,000 in the bank that qualified a man for equestrian status. Poets needed patrons so they could meet at dinner parties those who might read their works. The Sabine farm that Maecenas gave to Horace was not just money; it was also a subject for his poetry and a symbol of his life. Poets receive from patrons (including inspiration) but they give back something unique, their poetry, which creates an image of their patrons... but one not to be taken by us too literally or at face value. Horace's Maecenas is a fictive creation, bearing we-do-not-know-what relationship to the real Maecenas, friend of Augustus.

Horace's Odes include eight addressed to Maecenas and others in which he is alluded to. Remember that Romans who read used book rolls (not codex-type books) and therefore normally read sequentially, not jumping back and forth as we might in a poetry book now. The collection shows a gradual progression, distancing Horace from his patron, with a strategic citing of those poems that were addressed to Maecenas (starting with the first one in the first book).

I.1 Horace speaks of Maecenas' (putative) Etruscan descent and says that some people do this and others this but I (Horace) have the best life, that of a poet. Ivy links me to the gods, the groves, and withdraws me from the crowd, if the Muses allow; and if you, Maecenas, rank me among the lyric poets, then I will touch the stars with my head. (A very deferential poem)

I.20 Come drink with me, Maecenas, some Sabine wine in a Greek jar [an image of Horatian poetry]. I bottled it on my farm the day you were applauded in the theater when you recovered from your illness. (More familiar than I.1, affectionate and complimentary, but with a reminder of Horace's talent in the covert allusion to his own poetry.)

II.12 A recusatio. You wouldn't want me to write military or mythic topics in my lyric poetry. You would be better able to write Caesar's [Augustus'] exploits/victories in prose. I'd rather write love poems. (Coopting his patron; clever, affectionate, but teasing.)

II.17 (In reaction to Maecenas' fears of death) Why are you exhausting me with your complaints. We won't die separately. The stars say we'll live long and die together. Our stars are linked. You recovered and a falling tree missed killing me (because I am protected by Faunus, the woodland god, protector of poets). You, build a temple to Jupiter, while I offer a lamb to Faunus. (Showing the difference in their financial positions and mentioning a protector other than Maecenas)

II.18 (Patron not named; on the vanity of material things) The rich man courts me (for my poetry.)

II.19 Horace's vision of Bacchus, who inspired him -- no mention of Maecenas.

II.20 . Addressed to Maecenas but about poetic immortality. Horace is no longer dependent.

III. The theme in book 3 is now not just that Maecenas is the rich man and Horace is the poet but also that Horace knows how to live a/the good life. Horace shows himself to be the spiritual patron of Maecenas.

III.8 (Horace is celebrating on the Matronalia - Mothers' Day - but actually what he is privately celebrating is his escape from that falling tree.) Drink in my honor; dismiss public cares. Relax; be a privatus. (In this call to drinking to the poet's salvation, the focus has shifted to Horace. Maecenas is being invited to live for the day - as Horace does.)

III.29 Troubles are brought on by wealth. [Maecenas is the wealthiest man in Rome.] Therefore, I kept my head down so as not to be seen afar, unlike you, glory of the equestrian class [not a senator]. I am, accordingly, eager to leave the side of the rich. Blessed is the man to whom the gods have given satis (enough). A jar of mellow wine, as yet untouched, is waiting for you at my home. Joyful is the man who can say vixi (I have lived). (An invitation to leave the public sector and enjoy now, forgetting anxiety.) I don't want to be out at sea in a storm to make money; I'll go out for a row in my little rowboat. (Horace uses praesidium - citadel, protection - here as he does in I.1, but in I.1 Maecenas was Horace's praesidium, whereas now Horace is his own.)

III.30 (The final ode of the book, and not addressed to Maecenas.) exegi monumentum aere perennius I have completed a monument more lasting than bronze. VIVAM I shall live - immortal through my poetry.

In I.1 Horace's poetic immortality depended on Maecenas ranking him high; in III.30 Horace has already achieved his own poetic immortality -- not through Maecenas but through his muse, Melpomene. Horace maintains an affection for Maecenas, but distances himself on the basis of his own poetic ability. Maecenas was originally the main agent of Augustus, but (perhaps coincident with the building of the temple of Palatine Apollo) Augustus himself now takes over.