

David Cramer
The Impossibility of Maecenas

According to the Roman moralizing tradition, it was supposed to be impossible for a man to be both *mollis*, *solutus*, *discinctus* etc. and a competent leader (Corbeill 1996; Edwards 1993; Graver 1998). Yet as a trusted friend of Octavian, Maecenas at times wielded real power, controlled Rome in Octavian's absence, and proved to be an able leader. Velleius, the *Elegiae in Maecenatem*, and the Augustan poets acknowledge or at least nod to Maecenas' *mollitia*, but at the same time praise him on other grounds, such as his service to the state. Seneca is the first of our surviving sources to mount an extended attack (*Ep.* 114). Why is Maecenas so problematic for Seneca, writing sometime after 62 ce, over 54 years after his death?

It is tempting to answer that this is an inevitable result of his Stoicism, i.e. that by making virtue something internal rather than external and based on *existimatio*, as it had been in the Republic, Seneca has removed the space which had allowed his Augustan predecessors to make an allowance for the likes of Maecenas. Seneca uses Maecenas' bodily hexis and prose style to argue that his mind must be corrupt and that therefore he cannot receive credit even for his otherwise praiseworthy acts, such as his *mansuetudo*. According to Seneca, his prose style proves that he was *mollis* not *mitis* (114.7-8). Indeed, it sounds like Seneca is describing Maecenas' *mansuetudo* as a "right action" which is nevertheless not a "proper function." Seneca's stoicism, however, does not require him to make this move. He could have made the opposite argument, namely that Maecenas' services to the state were done for the right reasons and so counted as "right actions," while downplaying his conspicuous habits and excusing them as justifiable as the poets seem to be doing. However, in this letter Seneca insists that regular patterns of action do reveal the nature of the mind. Therefore, without denying the stoicizing aspects of the letter (for which see Graver's recent explication), it may be possible to find other implications in Seneca's criticism of Maecenas.

I suggest that although couched in the a long discussion of the connection between style and character, Seneca's comments on Maecenas' habits and the charge that these habits were designed to attract attention to himself (*cupierit videri* 114.4), would have resonated in his readers' minds with the figure of Nero, who by this period had adopted quite a conspicuous lifestyle himself and who also had made a mockery of the praise for his *mansuetudo* with which Seneca had marked the beginning of his reign in the *De Clementia*.