

The Great Goddess, Neoteric Poetry, and Menippean Satire

Most scholars assume that Catullus' Attis poem (63) inspired Maecenas to compose a poem on the same topic and in the same meter: Maecenas is one of only three Roman authors who wrote galliambics, the meter special to Cybele and her cult, and since other fragments of Maecenas' poetry clearly imitate Catullus' hendecasyllables, the logical conclusion is that Maecenas' galliambics were another attempt to imitate his more successful neoteric predecessor. As I will show, however, Catullus was not the only source of inspiration for galliambic meter, just as the Magna Mater was not a topic confined to neoteric poets.

It is true that among the many qualities that define neoteric poetry of the late Roman republic, a salient one is the subject of the Great Mother, or Cybele, whose myth was possibly first rendered as a mannered miniature epic or epyllion by some Hellenistic poet, though that original does not survive. In addition to his own poem on the subject in which the recent convert Attis regrets his decision to serve the goddess as a eunuch priest, we learn from Catullus (35) that his friend Caecilius was writing a poem about the Magna Mater, which, if it was ever completed, might have also been in galliambic meter. But neoteric poets were not the only ones concerned with the Great Goddess' myth and the bizarre, frenzied practices that surrounded her cult. The polymath Marcus Terentius Varro also took up the theme, writing about the establishment of her cult at Rome in the *De Lingua Latina* (6.15) and other works. More specifically, in Varro's Menippean satire entitled *Eumenides*, a young man discusses his own brush with the cult of the Great Mother, whose rituals at first attracted but then quickly repulsed him. In describing the enchanting music of the galli, the songs that Varro's character relates are composed in galliambic meter. Along with Catullus and Maecenas, Varro is the third Roman author whose galliambics survive.

Among his over 150 Menippean satires, Varro wrote one entitled *Prometheus*; combining certain of Maecenas' prose and poetry fragments, some scholars have argued that Maecenas' *Prometheus* cited by Seneca (*Ep.* 19.10) was likewise a Menippean satire. I will compare fragments of Varro's *Eumenides* with fragments of Maecenas' prose and poetry to show that despite the fact that Maecenas knows Catullus well and imitates his themes and meters, in the case of his galliambics he might be following a different model, one who had blazed new trails altogether. Maecenas certainly shares some of Varro's stylistic faults in his prose: this paper will argue that Maecenas also shared Varro's interest in the genre of Menippean satire, and his galliambics could be from his own story in prose and verse modeled on Varro's *Eumenides* rather than a poem about the Great Goddess composed in the spirit of neoteric poetry.