

The “Ode to *Mentula*” and the Interpretation of Maximianus’ *Opus*

The *opus* of the sixth-century CE Latin poet Maximianus is a unique and variegated piece of literature. The 686-line poem, which focuses on the twin themes of erotic love and death, features an extended lament on the maladies of old age, four vignettes narrating failed erotic encounters, a “guest appearance” by the famed philosopher Boethius, and, perhaps most intriguingly of all, a sizable ode, resembling a hymn in structure, to the phallus. The poet puts this remarkable passage in the mouth of a Greek musician (*Graeca puella*) whom the poet fails to satisfy on account of his impotence. When reproached by the deflated poet for her excessive carnality, the Greek girl corrects his misconception, telling him that she sings “not for any private, but rather for the public chaos” (*non privatum, sed generale chaos*). In the hymn that follows, the Greek girl transforms the male reproductive member into a symbol for generation and cosmic order very much in imitation of Lucretius’ “Hymn to Venus” in *De Rerum Natura*. The placement of the “Hymn to *Mentula*” at the climax of the final failed erotic encounter, and immediately before the epilogue of the poem, suggests that this portion of the text is essential to any interpretation of the entire poem.

Despite the centrality of this portion of the text to the interpretation of Maximianus’ *opus*, many scholars of the text have failed to link the “Hymn to *Mentula*” with the rest of the poem. Two notable exceptions to this trend are Schneider (2001) and Wasyl (2011) who both arrive at the conclusion that Maximianus’ *opus* is essentially a defense of the flesh in an age that often denigrated corporeal existence. Two aspects of Maximianus’ poem oppose such an interpretation. First, besides allusions to youthful exploits, which come off as mere fallacious boasting, there simply is no carnal enjoyment in Maximianus’ poem to speak of but instead there is only the physical torments of old age and unfulfilled desire. This seems curious for a poem

allegedly promoting the ennoblement of the corporeal body. Secondly, this interpretation fails to fully take the cosmic imagery of the poem, especially the imagery in the “Hymn to *Mentula*,” into account by essentially ignoring all extracorporeal implications.

I propose that that the “Hymn to *Mentula*” not only needs to be placed at the center of any interpretation of Maximianus’ *opus*, but also that the cosmological dimensions of the hymn should be taken seriously and not viewed merely as satiric elements added for ironic effect (as Szövérfy, 1968). I further propose that the statement put into the mouth of the *Graeca puella*, “I sing not for any private, but rather for the public chaos” should be taken as programmatic of not only the “Hymn to *Mentula*” but to the entire *opus* of Maximianus. Just like the *Graeca puella*, Maximianus is not singing about his own private sorrows, but for the entire Roman world. Just like the persona Maximianus constructs for himself in this poem, the phallus of the world, that is the regenerative, productive force of nature and human society, has grown impotent and unproductive. Like Maximianus the contemporary Roman world is frustrated, old, and dying.

Moreover, when Maximianus’ work is placed alongside other poetry from Ostrogothic Italy, such as the works of the poet Ennodius, or inscriptions preserved in churches and monuments or in the *Appendix Maximiani*, an obvious contrast emerges. These poems, often composed in the service of promoting the regimes of individual bishops and kings, emphasize the vernal renewal of the present time and promise a new era of prosperity, very often expressed in terms of natural generative power. Maximianus counters these extravagant claims by asserting the opposite. Given the devastating wars that ravaged Italy in the mid sixth century AD, it is tempting to see Maximianus’ poem as response to the destruction raging around him. Regardless, the *opus* of Maximianus uses the metaphors of erotic frustration and the inevitable decline of age to form a bitter rejoinder to the exuberant claims of contemporary panegyrists.

Bibliography

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