

Reading Antiquity: Petronius' *Satyricon*

A) Background:

- same Petronius who was “arbiter of elegance” to the emperor Nero, *consul suffectus* 62 AD, d. 66 AD (forced suicide)? (see Tac. *Annals* 16)
- ancient novel *Satyricon* (wanderings and debauched adventures of narrator Encolpius): NB incomplete state of text: originally 24 books? Extant portions from books 14 to 16?

B) characters

- narrator Encolpius and companions attends lavish dinner party of ex-slave Trimalchio along with freedmen friends of Trimalchio
- house and dinner party characterized by excess and extravagance (e.g. four *triclinia*, *Sat.* 77); can seem vulgar buffoon, getting things wrong (e.g. Trimalchio has best place, 31.8 “new fashion”; at least fourteen guests; slaves crowding onto couches, 70; mural at 29 showing personal accomplishments)

1) “There was the representation of a slave market, with placards bearing the names and prices of the slaves. Trimalchio himself was there, sporting long hair and holding a herald's wand; Minerva was escorting him on his entry into Rome..” (Petr. *Sat.* 29, tr. Walsh)

- Trimalchio = obsessed with death: see eg. 34 and 71 for will; tomb (do we make connections with tomb of Eurysaces, outside the Porta maggiore at Rome?): OTT (> enjoyment of life, in materialistic way)

2) “a slave brought in a silver skeleton ... He threw it down upon the table a time or two ...whereupon Trimalchio chimed in:

"Poor man is nothing in the scheme of things

And Orcus grips us and to Hades flings

Our bones! This skeleton before us here

Is as important as we ever were!

Let's live then while we may and life is dear." (Petr. *Sat.* 34)

- materialistic and big spender (linked to fear of death and social insecurity). OTT dinner party (apeing imperial practice?)

3) “The entertainment took place on a raft constructed on Marcus Agrippa’s lake. It was towed about by other vessels, with gold and ivory fittings. Their rowers were degenerates, assorted according to age and vice. Tigellinus [adviser of Nero] had also collected birds and animals from remote countries, and even products of the ocean. On the quays were brothels stocked with high-ranking ladies. Opposite them could be seen naked prostitutes, indecently posturing and gesturing.” (Tacitus *Annals* 15.37; tr. M. Grant)

- Trimalchio’s social and cultural pretensions undermined: he confuses Homeric myths, fails to distinguish between canonical and popular writers

4) “I myself think that Cicero was the more eloquent, but that Publilius [mime writer] had more probity” (Trimalchio, Petr. *Sat.* 55; tr. Walsh)

- trying to compete with elite: e.g. rings mimicking gold rings free-born equestrians could wear; purple-striped napkin (32)

5) “On the little finger of his left hand he [Trimalchio] sported a huge gilt ring, and the top joint of the next finger held a smaller one, which seemed to me to be solid gold, though it was clearly studded with iron stars.” (Petr. *Sat.* 32; tr. Walsh).

6) “sitting on a dais wearing the toga with a purple stripe and five gold rings” (Petr. *Sat.* 71; tr. Walsh, of picture Trimalchio wants on his tomb)

C) Encolpius the narrator: critical of his host

i) through Encolpius' eyes, Trimalchio = figure of fun (e.g. carried in, with shaven head, scarlet dressing gown; his boy favourite Croesus= ugly and playing with fat puppy Pearl which then gets into fight with Trimalchio's dog; physical frankness: discusses bowel movements, urges guests to relieve themselves)

7) “the sight of him evoked laughter from the unwary” (Petr. *Sat.* 32; Encolpius of Trimalchio)

8) “a lad endowed with watery eyes and hideously rotting teeth” (Petr. *Sat.*

64; Encolpius of Croesus)

9) “He was fastening a green jacket round a repulsively fat black puppy” (Petr. *Sat.* 64; Encolpius of Croesus)

10) “a hulking dog was led in on a lead” (Petr. *Sat.* 64; Trimalchio's dog Scylax i.e. “puppy”)

11) “The disturbance was not confined to the dog-fight: a lampstand was overturned on the table, shattering all the crystal glassware, and spraying some of the guests with hot oil” (Petr. *Sat.* 64)

12) “We thanked him for his generosity and consideration, and hastened to choke our laughter by taking frequent swigs of the wine” (Encolpius, Petr. *Sat.* 47; after toilet advice)

ii) implicit criticism that Trimalchio is low social class with high aspirations. Encolpius and friends (e.g. Ascyltus and Agamemnon) looking down at freedmen

13) “As for the other freedmen sharing his table, don’t write them off” (Petr. *Sat.* 38: freedman Hermeros warns Encolpius)

14) “Agamemnon, am I right that you are saying “Why is this boring man prattling on?”? I’m doing it because though you’re the expert with words, you’re saying nothing. You don’t belong to our patch, so you sniff at the way we poor buggers talk.” (Petr. *Sat.* 46; clothes-dealer Echion)

15) “Ascyltus, unruly and ill-behaved as ever, kept throwing his hands up and scoffing at each announcement, laughing till the tears came.” (Petr. *Sat.* 57)

iii) Trimalchio's boastfulness and lying: Trimalchio tweaks details for self-construction; Encolpius suspicious (e.g. wine)

16) “I anticipated that his words would match his general *extravagance* (*insolentia* [arrogance]), and that he would claim that he imported vessels from Corinth” (Petr. *Sat.* 50; Encolpius of Trimalchio)

17) “At that moment glass winejars, carefully sealed with gypsum were brought in. On their necks were fastened labels, with the inscription: ‘Falernian wine of Opimian vintage. One hundred years old.’ As we scrutinized the labels, Trimalchio clapped his hands...” (Petr. *Sat.* 34)

iv) Encolpius' disgust at Trimalchio's drunken sentimentality

18) “It was enough to make you spew. Trimalchio, so earnest in his repulsive drunkenness, ordered trumpeters to be summoned to the dining-room as a new form of entertainment.” (Petr. *Sat.* 78)

- BUT Encolpius undermined: character flaws. Not so different to Trimalchio

i) figure of fun (e.g. sexually preyed on by Quartilla's party)

19) “he slobbered over me with the filthiest of kisses. He then mounted the couch as well, and stripped me with all his strength in spite of my resistance. He laboured long and hard over my parts as he sweated away, and so much chalk appeared in the wrinkles of his cheeks that you would have thought that a wall was flaking after being damaged by rain.” (Petr. *Sat.* 23; Encolpius)

- Encolpius obsessed with boy lover Giton (e.g. gifts for him, *Sat.* 60); impotent (with Circe and her maid, the priestess of Priapus, Giton)

- Socially foolish: gets drunk and becomes sickened

20) “By now the flaming lamps seemed to me to have swollen in number, and the entire dining-room looked totally transformed.” (Petr. *Sat.* 64, drunken Encolpius)

21) “This show of kindness was followed by savouries; the very recollection of them, believe me, makes me puke.” (Petr. *Sat.* 65)

ii) Encolpius a low life figure (e.g. pretends to be a declamation enthusiast to get a free meal); dodgy past (seems violent)

22) “a damned sight worse than I am, praising that poet just to cadge an

invitation to dinner” (Petr. *Sat.* 10, Ascyltus to Encolpius)

23) “Shut your mouth, you filthy gladiator, saved by the midday Circus crowd! Pipe down, you assassin by night!” (Ascyltus' words to Encolpius, *Sat.* 9; hints at some past violence)

24) “Did I evade justice, cheat the arena, murder my host merely to lie here in spite of these claims to daring, a beggar and an exile” (Encolpius, Petr. *Sat.* 81)

iii) Encolpius' self-construction: falling into heroic roles (e.g. Aeneas or Achilles)

25) “The narrative strategy set in motion by our author (Petronius) ensures that the narrator (Encolpius) finds himself in a situation that can be interpreted according to an epic-heroic model. The young man *responds* by adapting himself to this model and claiming it as his own, that is, transforming himself into a “rhetorically” defined role. Having received the stimulus.. Encolpius continues to live through the episodic sequence according to the restrictions imposed by the literary model. Once activated, the grand narrative model drives Encolpius to identify himself with a great literary role ... to the point of losing his sense of reality and of the differences between them.” (Conte, *The Hidden Author*, p.4)

iv) Encolpius' drunken sentimentality: falls drunk into pool

26) “As he uttered these words, Trimalchio began to weep copiously..., ... By now even I had begun to blub” (Petr. *Sat.* 72)

27) “Giton preceded us ... until we came to the gate, where a dog on a chain greeted us with such a din that Ascyltus actually fell into the fish-pond. I was equally drunk, and earlier recoiled at the sight even of the painted dog; so as I tried to lend help as he swam about I was pulled into the same pool.” (Encolpius, Petr. *Sat.* 72; cf. 29)

v) Encolpius' hypocrisy: sponges off Trimalchio whilst criticizing

28) “We hailed his [Trimalchio's] witty quip, led by Agamemnon who knew how to earn a further invitation to dinner” (Petr. *Sat.* 52)

29) “We were not given much time to admire such sophisticated turns” (Petr. *Sat.* 60; ironic comment, of Homeric performance)

30) “A figure of Priapus, fashioned by the chef, occupied the centre, and in his expansive paunch he held fruit of every kind, and grapes in the conventional mode. *With some eagerness (avidius)* we stretched out our hands towards this display.” (Petr. *Sat.* 60)

- Encolpius undermined: narratorial credibility shaken. How reliable an observer? Often misinterprets (e.g. fails to get Trimalchio's culinary tricks)

31) “I nearly discarded my helping, as it seemed already to have hardened into a chicken, but then I heard an experienced guest say: ‘There is sure to be something good in this.’ So I poked ... and found inside a plump little fig-pecker, coated in peppered yolk of egg.” (*Sat.* 33)

32) “I suspected that such repetition if the word spelt a sophisticated joke, so I boldly questioned the man reclining next to me. He had witnessed such sportive diversions quite often, and replied: ‘You see the fellow carving the meat? His name is *Carver* (*Carpus*), so whenever Trimalchio cries “*Carver*” (*Carpe*), he is at once calling on him and giving him his instructions.’” (Petr. *Sat.* 36)

- Encolpius undermined: change in his perception as dinner progresses. Initially awestruck, later in discomfort because of over-eating. Affects his assessment.

33) “Quite wonderstruck” (Petr. *Sat.* 28, Encolpius at sight of Trimalchio’s litter and personal musician)

34) “Sated with these delights” (Petr. *Sat.* 30, of murals)

35) “We were enjoying this refined fare” (Petr. *Sat.* 32)

36) “All this oppression would have been endless if the dessert had not been brought in” (Petr. *Sat.* 69)

37) “So far we could put up with it, but then a much more preposterous

dish appeared which made even death by starvation preferable.” (Petr. *Sat.* 69: goose made of pork dish)

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