

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
**ENCOLPIUS**

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

**Encolpius** (in the *Satyricon* of Petronius) **rational**

**Overview** Petronius (27-86 A.D.) was a Roman courtier in the time of the Emperor Nero, serving him as consultant, advisor, even friend, but inevitably at risk in the high stakes and high living environment of that licentious ruler. Petronius was not, though, simply a playboy—that came in the latter part of his relation to the Emperor—but seems to have served effectively as Governor of Bithynia, and in other demanding administrative jobs. He came to be called the court's *arbiter elegantiae*, *judge of taste*, for his artistic and critical judgments were invariably sharp, erudite, and merciless. His judgments of individuals were also dangerous, and many a foe—eventually a fatal cabal—grew up against him in the atmosphere of the court, until he was finally overwhelmed by his enemies.

**Character** Encolpius is an ex-gadiator, whose thoughts and escapades form the first quarter of Petronius's *Satyricon*. (The remainder of the text, which largely involves the *Dinner Party of Trimalchio*, is loosely a continuation of the tale of Encolpius.) The tone of Encolpius—*sermo plebeius*, or street talk of the day in Rome—brings along with this character a closeness to daily life, vulgar and gross but very lively—that stand out brilliantly against the high Latin classical pieces of contemporaries like Cicero or Horace. Less inspiring morally even than Trimalchio, Encolpius is nevertheless a kind of intellectual, or at least a wandering literary critic. He alone seems to observe the wacky and extravagant events that make up the energy of Trimalchio's dinner.

**Parallels** Almost an historical first, for its novelistic energy, the *Satyricon* is narrated by a homosexual ex-gadiator who also participates in the festivities. Might one look for a Francois Villon (1431-63) to find a figure able, like Encolpius, both to plunge into the social extremities, and to keep a narrative head about him? Ferdinand Bardamu, in Céline's *Journey to the End of the Night* (1932), steps forth as nihilistic and misanthropic—not far off Encolpius's cold assessment of humanity—and open to any sexual arrangement that proposes itself. The novelist D B C Pierre in *Lights Out in Wonderland* (2010) takes ample advantage of the *Satyricon*—with Encolpius, to reference his goofy and hilarious cynicism. We have also to mention Fellini's film *Satyricon* (1969) in any up to date retake on Petronius' orgiastic satire; here is a full representation of Encolpius as narrator-participant.

### Illustrative moments

**Critical** Encolpius opens his tale like a classical narrator, addressing a friend to whom he is completing a long promise: 'such a long time has passed since first I promised you the story of my adventures.' He is now, he says, in just the right place and mind set to fulfill his promise. And where is he? He seems to be in front of or near a school, in which an influential teacher has been discoursing on the follies of superstition, careless language, and declamation—which for Encolpius seems the bane of the pedagogy of his day.

**Real** Like the Trimalchio we meet in the longer section of the *Satyricon*, Encolpius is both a scalliwag and an intellectual presence. His basic viewpoint, as we meet him, is that the art of letters should conform to the basics of life, tell it as it is. Encolpius himself declaims against the declaimers, the noisy Asiatics, who forever demand of their students fancy phrases and outrageous allusions. As the narrator of the whole *Satyricon*, including the following section on Trimalchio, Encolpius sets a tone of intellectual credibility—keep it real, boys!—in which to formulate the antics and desperate measures that will characterize the whole work of Petronius.

**Distractable** Encolpius has love and sex on his mind, even as he opens with his thoughts on life. He had been speaking to a group of students, when he was interrupted by a slightly older (perhaps graduate?) student, who catches Encolpius' attention. No sooner, though, does Encolpius drift away from dull reality, than he realizes his former lover, Ascyrtos, with whom he has been sharing the escapades that precede this book, has 'given him the slip.' He races off in search of Ascyrtos, but en route meets a woman who directs him to a nasty whorehouse, where in fact he finds Ascyrtos. A lesson is learned: keep it real.

**Passive** Encolpius, we see, has a philosophic theme—keep it real—and yet is also just a 'site,' that is a place where things happen; he's that kind of character—to be contrasted, for example, to a 'rounded' or full-bodied character like *Oliver Twist*. Pages blow by and one thing after another happens to his small team of lovers and ex lovers, and Encolpius lives it until it hurts, and then changes the configuration of events. Given this free and easy narrative development—and a broken ancient text—we hardly know how he comes under the power of a devotee of Priapus, Quartilla, whose handmaidens overpower him and his lovers and subject them to sexual torture.

### Discussion questions

When you first meet Encolpius he is standing in front of an institution of rhetoric and declamation. He hates the flowery 'Asiatic' style of his time. What kind of presentation does Encolpius offer, as he narrates the tale of his adventures in the *Satyricon*?

With what kind of eye does Encolpius view the excesses of Trimalchio's banquet? Does Encolpius stand 'above' or 'outside' such doings?

Encolpius, as we said above, is a 'tell it like it is' guy. Has he an eye for 'realistic details'? How does he describe his own involvement in Trimalchio's party?