

## Petronius

**History of Roman Literature.** Though our emphasis is falling on the development of genres, of or diverse forms of imagination, in Roman literature, we are inevitably constructing an image of the chronological *flow* of Roman literature and culture. It will have become clear, from what we have been reading to date, that the half century following the death of Augustus was fraught with social conflicts and vivid human passions. Tacitus and Seneca have made the point for us, and we will soon have lyric poetry, like that of Catullus, to amplify the point from another direction. Our attention this week will fall on a brilliant satirist of just the period we are considering.

**Life of Petronius.** Little is known of the life of Petronius. Like Seneca, who had only contempt for the hedonistic life-style of the first century A.D., Petronius too was implicated in the goings on of imperial society 'at the highest level.' He himself came, apparently, of a wealthy family, and moved naturally into the intense life of metropolitan Rome. We may know him best for a raucous pre novel, the *Satyricon*, but must realize that he also did responsible work as a citizen, serving as Governor of the Province of Bithynia in 62 A.D., and after that as Consul, or First Magistrate, of Rome. These posts, however, led 'yet higher' in to the inner circle of Nero's court—remember the machinations of Nero, in the account given by Tacitus—and from there to appointment as Nero's *arbiter elegantiae*, or court judge of fashion. That this post was official and recognized is a measure of the high-life level that dominated the Imperial Court.

**Petronius' fate.** We do know that, after having achieved significant influence over the Emperor Nero, Petronius inevitably found himself the object of jealousy. Tigellinus, commander of Nero's public guard, accused Petronius—wrongly, as we know—of conspiring to kill the Emperor, whereupon Petronius was arrested, in 65 A.D. Before the Emperor had returned from campaign, Petronius, who was to the max a hedonist and not a masochist, proceeded to commit suicide. The way he did so was as distinctive as the way he lived his life. He cut his veins, which bled only feebly, so that he temporarily postponed his death, while chatting with his friends, listening to pop music, and reclining. Only after it had become evident that he needed help, in dispatching himself, did his companions essentially suffocate him with steam from his bath. (Remember Seneca?)

**Ancient satire.** *The Satyricon*, the only text Petronius left us, has been a smash hit with readers from the beginning. On the surface, the explanation might seem to be the over the top luxury and eroticism climate of the text—the anal, the urinary, and the phallic competing for top role. The fact is, though, that the *Satyricon* is an exceptionally innovative form of that satirical genre which is occasionally a byproduct of conspicuously over-sophisticated societies. (We will turn, next week, to another brilliant Roman satirist, Juvenal, whose chief target, like that of Petronius, was the decadence of first century A. D. Rome. We will be asking ourselves, as we advance, why Greek society generated almost no satire—except for aspects of Aristophanes' comic drama—while Roman was rich in the genre.) The narrator of the tale, Encolpius, recounts events as do the narrators of early English novels, like Fielding's *Tom Jones*, where the tale teller is also immersed in the events being told about. Formally, therefore, Petronius' tale makes moves toward the novel,

in its earliest western form. And there is much more to say about those moves, for the world Encolpius tells us about smacks of that 'real world' so forcefully brought to the literary text by the novels of Renaissance Europe—cf. *Gil Blas* or *Don Quixote*—in which literary convention often steps aside to let the rawness of ordinary life assert itself.

**The *Satyricon*.** It might well be added that the narrator of the *Satyricon* travels dark paths of irony, which complement his broadly satirical view of the society he portrays. The passage below both caricatures the indifference of the 'elite' to the trashed people of their society, and leaves us gasping, as we absorb the bitter subtext of the narrator's words.

*We had had enough of these novelties and started to enter the dining-room when a slave, detailed to this duty, cried out, "Right foot first." Naturally, we were afraid that some of us might break some rule of conduct and cross the threshold the wrong way; nevertheless, we started out, stepping off together with the right foot, when all of a sudden, a slave who had been stripped, threw himself at our feet, and commenced begging us to save him from punishment, as it was no serious offense for which he was in jeopardy; the steward's clothing had been stolen from him in the baths, and the whole value could scarcely amount to ten sesterces. So we drew back our right feet and intervened with the steward, who was counting gold pieces in the hall, begging him to remit the slave's punishment. Putting a haughty face on the matter, "It's not the loss I mind so much," he said, "as it is the carelessness of this worthless rascal. He lost my dinner clothes, given me on my birthday they were, by a certain client, Tyrian purple too, but it had been washed once already. But what does it amount to? I make you a present of the scoundrel!"*

## Readings

Petronius, *Satyricon*, trans. Arrowsmith (New York, 1983).

Courtney, Edward, *A Companion to Petronius* (Oxford, 2001.)

Sullivan, J.P., *The Satyricon of Petronius: A Literary Study* (London, 1968).

## Discussion questions

The life Petronius pillories is that of the Roman *nouveaux riches* of Nero's moment. What does Petronius think of the 'little guy'? What is his attitude toward the slaves in Trimalchio's house?

Does the *Satyricon* read like a novel to you? Do you see a plot developing, and a 'growth' in the central characters?

Do you leave Petronius' satire with the sense that he has scourged evil, or does he himself seem to delight in the fallen world he describes.

How do Petronius and Juvenal differ as satirists? Do they share a single opinion about the life of Rome, or are their targets totally different from each other?