

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

# PETRONIUS

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(27 C.E.-66 C.E.)

## Works

Satyricon (61 C.E.)

## Biography

We know little of the early life of Petronius, beyond the fact that he appears to have been born in 27 C.E. What we can surmise, from writers like the historian Tacitus, suggests that Petronius was from a well-to-do family—and to be sure the high luxury living style, to which he later became accustomed at the court of Nero, suggests a privileged if not a pampered childhood. The details of his education, and of his access to the world of Nero's court, are unknown to us, apart from the fact that he served—responsibly and energetically, by all reports—as Roman consul under Nero, for the province of Bithynia. (Tentative scholarship points to the possible overspill, in parts of the *Satyricon*, of early Christian oral tradition, to which Petronius may have had access during his tenure in Bithynia, in Northwest Anatolia.)

Subsequent to his service as a *suffect consul*, he was introduced into that community of the Roman senatorial class, which freely devoted themselves to lives of pleasure. (The issue of pleasure-seeking and pleasure-valuing was hot in first century C.E. Rome, at a time when certain Roman thought traditions, like the Stoicism to which the philosopher-dramatist Lucius Annaeus Seneca subscribed, firmly opposed the hedonist life ardently encouraged at the court of the Emperor Nero (37 C.E.-68 C.E.).) Petronius' life style fitted comfortably into the hedonistic *grand monde*. We owe our most studious portrait of this extraordinary man to the Roman historian Tacitus (58 C.E.-120 C.E.) who in his *Annals* (XVI, 18), explains the meaning of *arbiter elegantiae*-- 'judge of taste'--the role to which Nero appointed Petronius at court. (This 'judge of taste' was to be consulted, and followed, in all judgements of taste which came up at court; his word was law.) Tacitus makes it further clear that Petronius—who had been an official of energy and competence in Bithynia—let himself go into that softened milieu in which self-indulgence and gossip were the daily nourishment.

*He spent his days in sleep, his nights in attending to his official duties, or in amusement, that by his dissolute life he had become as famous as other men by a life of energy, and that he was regarded as no ordinary profligate, but as an accomplished voluptuary. His reckless freedom of speech, being regarded as frankness, procured him popularity...he became one of the chosen circle of Nero's intimates, and was looked upon as an absolute authority on questions of taste*

The high position of Petronius at court inevitably attracted envy. The commander of the Emperor's bodyguard, Tigellinus, invented an excuse for accusing Petronius of treason. In consequence Petronius was arrested at Cumae, in 65 C.E. Here is where the interesting development occurred. Knowing that the Emperor was going to get rid of him, Petronius decided to take matters into his own hands. He decided to commit suicide, but to do it in his own way, as befitted a master of taste.

Tacitus, once again, fills out the story for us. Petronius invited select guests to his villa, where he stretched out comfortably before him, and made incisions in the veins of his arms and legs, slowly but inconspicuously promoting the loss of blood. So tastefully done was this self-bloodletting that the whole company enjoyed themselves, without paying particular attention to what was happening; no heavy talk about the soul or immortality clouded this get-together among sophisticated equals.

While calmly dying, Petronius attended to household responsibilities, praising and gifting this household slave, or having that one flogged. In Tacitus' words, 'he dined, indulged himself in sleep, in order that

death, though forced on him, might have a natural appearance.' In his will Petronius broke with the practice of excessive praise of patrons and the wealthy; rather he told all, sending on to Nero, in a private document, information about the most egregiously vicious court members, and about their latest social or sexual outrages. His last gesture was to break his fluorospar wine-dipper, so that it would never be used at the emperor's table.

### **Achievements**

Petronius' greatest achievement, from the literary standpoint, was to introduce the art of everyday fictive prose and many registers of daily language into Roman literature. By the time of Petronius we have seen versions of fictive stories in Greek, we have read Plautus and Terence; we are familiar with the street languages of ancient Rome, vulgar Latin in every sense in the formation, and we know a bit, from contemporary poets like Catullus, about the depths of rage, scorn, and passion to which the Roman writer could on occasion free himself. Petronius, however, goes beyond all those measuring points, in his defining of a free, vigorous, and imaginatively unfettered set of portraits of his time. Think of the grotesqueries of Trimalchio, the crazy sexual adventures of Encolpius, the reckless assault of Quartilla and her maids, against the three gays who open the whole drama!

### **Characters**

**Encolpius**, while not a richly developed personality, is a driving figure in the Trimalchio fiction remaining to us. He is sexually ambivalent, dogged with anxiety, and represents the forefront of narrative awareness in the visit to Trimalchio's banquet. From the standpoint of literary history, Encolpius' perfectly rendered street voice is a giant milestone in the development of Latin--thus of western, at that point-- literature. Certain characters in Thackeray and Fielding, to touch base with 18th century British fiction, come to mind as we listen to Encolpius.

**Trimalchio** is a super wealthy, vulgar, and obscene freedman, who exemplifies the Nero era taste for extravagant self-indulgence and sexual exaggeration. Most of his guests, at the banquet he hosts, are freedmen like him, former slaves who have come into a kind of new respectability. Hence their joy in cutting loose. Worth noting: Trimalchio has a gentle side, too, paying attention to such details as a fellow freedman, whom Trimalchio is including in his will.

**Quartilla**, one tough babe, mentioned here only to illustrate the fact that Petronius--like William Burroughs (in *Naked Lunch*), two millenia later-- can scrape the social bottom, in order to come up with bottom-feeding characters who are as dangerous as their language.