

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
SATYRICON

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Satyricon by Petronius

Story

We are in the realm of fiction, now, though Petronius models real life as well as imagination in building up a rarely surpassed image of imperial sensuality.

The narrative opens onto its narrator, and principal character, Encolpius, a famous gladiator. At his house with him is a servant Giton, with whom he is in a consensual homosexual relation, while in their milieu circulate various small fry and travelling companions. like Ascyltos. The three guys run into a cohort of chicks, led by Quartilla, who deplores the guys' efforts to pry into the Priapean cult the chicks are devoted to. The girls beat up the guys, torture them, then feed them a terrific dinner and make out with them. We are well launched on *The Satyricon*.

The first major section of Petronius' text—which is broken and fragmented at many points-- sets in as the three guys of our acquaintance are invited to dinner with a hugely wealthy and vulgar freedman, named Trimalchio. Once inside the mansion of Trimalchio, and having bathed in the traditional way, in the entry hall, the three men enter the dining room—with a large cohort of freedmen. Amazing courses are served, while Trimalchio, who is hugely fat and incontinent, leaves his guest and heads for the toilet. (Petronius, through his narrator, takes the opportunity, during his host's toilet breaks, to reports with brio on the guests' conversation, which turns around matters of everyday life—kids' education, local politics, what this and that fashionable person is wearing or doing—and gives us rare insight into life on the street in Nero's Rome.) It is Trimalchio's practice to fill up his emptied stomach as richly as possible, after toilet breaks, and accordingly we, along with our narrator and his two friends, are treated to an ongoing festival of exotic foods and drinks and extravagant actings out like masturbation on demand, until finally even our guests grow sated with the event, and look for an opportunity to get out.

In the following chapters, reconstructable from the seriously incomplete manuscript of the *Satyricon*, we follow our three main characters through a picaresque sequence of gay erotic interplays, replete with jealousies, make ups, and sulks, as well as through such social cultural events as a visit to an art gallery, disquisitions on the reigning art styles of the age, and chatter with poets who are hot on the scene. The text is ragged, and the connecting tissues among events are largely missing. We get the idea.

In following chapters our narrator and friends travel on shipboard, squabble among themselves, come up on a to them unknown shore, near Crotona, where the inhabitants are known to be ruthless legacy hunters. Eumolpius, a poet friend of Encolpius, agrees to pose as a sickly and super rich man, who is accompanied by his slaves—the others in their company—to attract the legacy hungers, who prove compatible after all.

When the text resumes—this is the kind of problem characteristic of understanding many ancient literary texts—we are in the midst of a love and sex quandary, which poses our friend Encolpius against a gorgeous dame named Circe. Encolpius cannot get it up; an enchantress is called in, fails with a magical cure, and is followed by a temporary solution, a huge leather dildo.

Characters

Encolpius, while not a richly developed personality, is a driving figure in the pieces of fiction remaining to us. He is sexually ambivalent, dogged with sexual anxiety, and represents the forefront of narrative awareness in the visit to Trimalchio's banquet.

Trimalchio is a super wealthy, vulgar, and obscene freedman, who exemplifies the Nero era taste for extravagant self-indulgence and sexual exaggeration. Worth noting: Trimalchio has a gentle side, too, paying attention to such details as a fellow freedman, whom Trimalchio is including in his will.

Themes

Sexual jealousy. Encolpius and his two gay buddies, whom we track off and on throughout the story, are in a perpetual condition of sexual jealousy, not to mention Encolpius's straight sex impotence anxieties, late in the tale. Interestingly enough, the conversations overheard at Trimalchio's feast include what we would call suburban chatter, about kids and ordinary family life.

The limits of pleasure. It is a sub point, of the feast of Trimalchio, that the human being has a pleasure cap. One can only repeat-vomit so many times, or oh and ahh so many times, as a live bird flies up from the center of your soufflé. Lust and joylessness carry out a tiring ballet with one another.