

# SATYRICON

## Petronius

**Overview** Petronius (27-86 A.D.) was a Roman courtier in the time of the Emperor Nero, serving 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 is 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 in the atmosphere of the court, until he was finally overwhelmed by his enemies.

### 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 acting 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 hunters, 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.

## 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.

**Sexual boredom** 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.

## 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.

## MAIN CHARACTERS

TRIMALCHIO (extravert)

**Character** Trimalchio is the outstanding extravagant character to pass through the pages of Petronius' first century B.C. novel, the *Satyricon*. In the book Trimalchio plays the chief part only in the section called *The Dinner Party of Trimalchio*. Trimalchio, an ex-slave become arrogant, through providing services others would (and did) consider too shocking to consider, is known for throwing lavish parties, in which sex and food, among other things, are pushed to the extreme: live birds sewn up inside a pig—and released as the delicacy of the evening; a dish to represent every sign of the zodiac.

**Parallels** Shakespeare comes first to mind, for his creation of larger than life, fully rounded characters like Falstaff and the Wife of Bath, each of which exceeds Trimalchio in taste for life, if not in grossness. Both of these Shakespearean characters embody an awareness of themselves, which is the ultimate touch of the human condition. Somerset Maugham, in *Of Human Bondage* (1915) creates a life-loving character, Thorpe Athelny, who raises a large rambunctious, vital family, in whom he inculcates his own fascination with life and the ideas that give it richness. Eating, drinking, and philosophizing, he emulates a Trimalchio of our time.

## Illustrative moments

**Compassionate** Trimalchio, an ex slave, has accumulated wealth, a huge mansion, a classy chorus girl wife with a taste for porn and plenty of practice, and a talent for holding large, extravagant, and raunchy parties. But he is not simply a lech and a lust; he has a philosophy. 'He has a time piece in his dining room, and a trumpeter especially provided for the purpose keeps him constantly informed how much of his lifetime is gone.' Throughout the 'dinner' he hosts, at the center of the *Satyricon*, Trimalchio takes care of others, both his guests, and those who will inherit from him: he is a sensuous and extravagant life-lover but a careful guy—in his way.

**Reveller** Within his party environment, Trimalchio gives play to fun and games: he enjoys tossing green balls onto the floor, gets a kick out of pissing in the gilded chamber pot that a couple of eunuchs

hold out before him, and out of wiping his urine covered hands in the hair of the eunuch lads. 'Moving to the center of his main hall, Trimalchio let himself be drenched with unguent, then wiped off not however with ordinary towels but with pieces of blanketing of the softest and finest wool.' He capers among his fellow revelers, whipping up the spirit of the evening—'evening's for fun, day's for play.'

**Camp** In high camp style, we might say, 'wrapped in a wraprascal of scarlet frieze, he was placed in a litter, preceded by four running foot men, and a wheeled chair, in which his favorite rode, a little old young man, sore-eyes and even uglier than his master.' Trimalchio vanishes briefly with his love entourage, then returns to the dinner table for the major feast of the evening. Displaying the wine choices available for the evening's dinner, Trimalchio stops briefly to masturbate, meanwhile reflecting on the passage of great wines which outlive their mortal consumers. It is a call to joy! 'Drink and make merry while you may.'

**Showman** Trimalchio prides himself on his exquisite and tricky cuisines, which form the showpieces of his dinner—the place where his own artistic capacity shines. He delights in surprising the guests with such as this: 'a dish was brought in with a basket on it, in which lay a wooden hen, her wings outspread round her as if she were sitting.' Trimalchio alleges a fear that the peafowl's eggs, on which the hen is sitting, may be half-hatched. Are they edible? The guests are given half-pound spoons, and told to break the eggs. And what is concealed in the pastry eggs but a very fine beccaficco, 'swimming in yoke of egg flavored with pepper.'

### Discussion questions

Does Petronius like Trimalchio? Or does Trimalchio push the boundaries of crazy hedonism too far?

In what ways does Trimalchio care for his guests? Is he interested in them as real people or simply as organisms to stuff with food?

What role does Encolpius play, in opening out Trimalchio for us?

ENCOLPIUS (rational)

**Character** Encolpius is an ex-gladiator, 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-gladiator 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 have an eye for 'realistic details'? How does he describe his own involvement in Trimalchio's party?