

The Recollections of Encolpius

ANCIENT NARRATIVE

Supplementum 2

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The Recollections of Encolpius

The *Satyrical* of Petronius as Milesian Fiction

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Preface

Like probably every modern student of the *Satyrica*, I began working with a text that did not make a whole lot of sense to me. While reading the scholarly literature, furthermore, I was struck by the ubiquitous exceptionalism of twentieth-century Petronian studies. Numerous articles and books written within the last hundred years contain emphatic statements to the effect that Petronius is unlike any other author and the *Satyrica* a unique work to which no ordinary rules apply. It soon became clear to me that the very paradox of the *Satyrica* and its author—a paradox which had, as I found out, been created by scholars themselves not much more than a century ago—had come to function as a hermeneutic barrier in reading the *Satyrica*. Because Petronius was thought to be so exceptional, his text became virtually inexplicable and readers gave up trying to interpret the work as a coherent whole. Instead, most scholarly work concentrated on bits and pieces of the preserved text which could be usefully studied without having to deal with the problems of the genre or the narrator, beyond reaffirming the negative modern thesis that the one was synthetic and that behind the other hid the author.

Unsurprisingly, then, the conservative wish to respect the premises of the discipline and the institutional pressures to come up with new things to say about this ancient text have lately generated what are, in my view, some rather bizarre readings. One may be told variously that Encolpius' fictional autobiography is "the narrative equivalent" of a play, or that as a text it "resists" its own interpretation, or even that it is "anti-narrative", communicating only through the figures of language. Meanwhile, there has been no examination of the modern conception or reception of the *Satyrica*—clearly by now bankrupt as such, but all the same providing a basis for downbeat conservative scholarship and avant-garde theorizing alike—viz. that it was written to give a novelistic, even realistic description of the author's times, or the image of Petronius as an original Italian genius, "perhaps the only Roman who created his art independent of the Greeks". In the last sections of this study I attempt such an examination, but I have by no means exhausted the subject and much more could be said about the prejudices motivating the invention of the modern Petronius.

If we can relieve it of the baggage of its nineteenth-century reception, the *Satyrica* will turn out to be both less than it has recently been thought to be

and more than we had previously hoped. It can be thought of as a complicated literary game, informed by a sophistic reading of the Homeric *Odyssey*, but its rules are at least consistent and can be studied. Its humor and message are scholastic in a positive sense, learned and playful. The Lucianic author of the *Erotes*—a text which, as I show in my study, has much in common with the *Satyrica*—justifies such story telling in the prologue as relaxation for the educated scholar who is weary of unceasing attention to serious topics. But scholars are serious beings and their fun is not without a darker side. Preoccupation with shady topics is indeed a characteristic of the *Satyrica*, its tone is often sarcastic and the story hopelessly obscene. One aspect of this kind of literature is its examination of the ancient belief system of scholars, the scholarly view of the world. Reading it with attention today could provoke an examination of the modern reader's attitudes. Gian Biagio Conte argues quite correctly that the *Satyrica* is not mainly trying to advance a pseudo-aristocratic grudge against uneducated upstarts like Trimalchio but is, equally, an analysis of the rich but certainly confused and sometimes sordid mentality of the learned. The genre involves a playful dismantling of scholarly preconceptions, a kind of Saturnalia for the literati.

Petronius' *Satyrica* is a derivative text in two senses: firstly, it plays the genre-derivative game of satire and parody, and secondly, our Latin text by Petronius Arbiter looks and feels like a Roman palimpsest, a reworking of a preexisting Greek *Satyrica*, most likely called just that, Σατυρικά. The proposal that Petronius' text is a palimpsest has not been made before, and it was not an easy one to make. Such a hypothesis is, of course, the polar opposite of the belief in Petronian originality which has been unshaken since Mommsen's days and held by German, Italian, French, British and American scholars alike. Great scholars have been ridiculed for suggesting that Petronius had imitated a preexisting Greek genre or even borrowed a motif from Greek folktales. In fact, the few scholars who, like the German philologist Karl Bürger, dared to suggest that Petronius was writing a traditional work never argued for the possibility of a Roman palimpsest. What is meant by a "Greek model" in Petronian scholarship is never a single Greek text adapted by Petronius but either a "serious" (tragic) type of Greek novel to be parodied à la Heinze, or some hypothetical Greek genre which is designated by some such label as "realistic", "comic", "criminal" or the anachronistic "picaresque" (from the Spanish word *picaro*), with its German translation *Schelmenroman*. Although a rather obvious one, were it not for a scholarly blind spot, the possibility of a straightforward adaptation from an otherwise lost Greek text has not been entertained before, not even when scholars have attempted to list all the hypothetical possibilities (Jensson 2002, 88).

The present book is a substantially revised version of my dissertation, written in Rome and Toronto from 1994 to 1996, and defended at the University of Toronto in November 1996. At the time the text was accepted without changes, and therefore I should perhaps employ the Horatian topos and pride myself on having waited until the ninth year before publishing. But I cannot claim to have done so out of modesty or a desire to create a perfect work. In fact, the dissertation has been a copyrighted text in the public domain for most of this time. Having completed it, moreover, I further developed my redefinition of the generic term “Milesian” in a paper I read at a graduate seminar in Toronto in March 1997, and again in a reworked form under the title “Milesian Tales: Short Stories or Novels?” at the CAC Meeting in June 1997 in Newfoundland. The arguments advanced in these talks, which were not published as such but are now integrated into this study, are in many ways similar to those presented by Stephen Harrison at the Groningen Colloquia on the Novel (May 1997) in a paper published a year later in the homonymous series under the title “The Milesian Tales and the Roman Novel”. At the time neither of us knew of the other’s work. I should also mention that an article I published in *Ancient Narrative* 2, “The *Satyrica* of Petronius as a Roman palimpsest”, is a byproduct of the present study. Unfortunately, it is not impossible that this book, because its completion has taken so long, does not adequately reflect relevant literature published since 1996. I have, however, tried to take recent work into consideration in my rewriting, and in the meantime I have undertaken to review significant new books (see bibliography); formulations developed in those reviews have admittedly contributed in places to the present text.

At various stages I have benefited from the advice of helpful readers and referees, and many colleagues and friends have provided generous help to me while writing and rewriting this book. I owe them all an immense debt. Originally my readership was composed of a select few, the members of my committee, all of whom were encouraging and ready with advice. I am certainly most grateful to my supervisor Roger Beck, who never showed signs of losing faith when my initial attempts were unsuccessful, and later read drafts of individual chapters thoroughly and wrote useful comments in the margin, several of which have found their way into the present text. I would also like to extend my gratitude to Brad Inwood, who in the office of graduate coordinator was more actively involved than was required of him. It has been my good fortune to work with Hugh Mason, whose knowledge of ancient prose narratives proved invaluable, and Christopher Jones whose graduate seminar on the ancient novel constituted the beginning of the work that has led to the present book. Alison Keith, Eric Csapo and Catherine

Connors deserve special thanks for their helpful suggestions and friendly advice. Neither should I forget to mention the valuable insights of Gerald Sandy whose report on my thesis I have made use of in my rewriting. Arthur James, Patricia Fagan and Robert Nickle, fellow graduate students at Toronto, frequently lent patient ears to my discursive experimentation relating to the vast problems of the *Satyrica*. I also wish to remember the staff of the Robarts Library and the adjacent Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library which houses many Petronian treasures bequeathed by the late Gilbert Bagnani. Similarly, my warm thanks go to Ann-Marie Matti of the Department of Classics at the University of Toronto.

I owe to Maaïke Zimmerman the fact that my book has now finally been printed. After reading a copy of the dissertation I had sent to a colleague of hers in Groningen, she wrote me to suggest the possibility of publishing it as an *Ancient Narrative Supplement*. I am also grateful to Minna Skafte Jensen for reading my work and encouraging me to publish, and to Tarrin Wills, Michael Chesnutt, Matthew Driscoll and Christopher Sanders, at The Arnamagnæan Institute in Copenhagen, where most of the rewriting took place, who have provided much good advice on the English language. My friend Claudia Neri deserves warm thanks both for generously offering to design the dust jacket and for all the help she provided while I was writing the dissertation. Last but not least, I wish to acknowledge the vital support of my wife Annette Lassen who has read the entire text in typescript and suggested many improvements. Despite all the help I have received the following text will surely still contain imperfections. It goes without saying that I alone am responsible for the remaining errors, misunderstandings and infelicities.