

Priapus and the Shipwreck (Petronius, *Satyricon* 100–114)

NIALL W. SLATER
Emory University

The wreck of Lichas's ship in the *Satyricon* has long been connected with the theme, detectable elsewhere in the novel as well, of the wrath of Priapus, one part of the novel's parody of epic.¹ The evidence usually cited here is Lichas's dream, in which Priapus directly claims credit for bringing Encolpius onto Lichas's ship:

videbatur mihi secundum quietem Priapus dicere: 'Encolpion quod quaeris, scito a me in navem tuam esse perductum.' exhorruit Tryphaena et 'putes' inquit 'una nos dormiisse: nam et mihi simulacrum Neptuni, quod Bais <in> tetrastylo notaveram, videbatur dicere: "in nave Lichae Gitona invenies."' (104,1–2)

It seemed to me in my dream that Priapus said: 'Since you ask, know that Encolpius has been led by me onto your ship.' Tryphaena shuddered and said, 'You'd think we slept together: the statue of Neptune I noticed in the gallery at Baiae seemed to say to me: "you will find Giton on the ship of Lichas."'

Indeed, the pairing of Lichas's dream with that of Tryphaena about Giton seems to overdetermine the theme: just as Neptune (Poseidon) pursued Ulysses (Odysseus), so too does Priapus pursue and persecute Encolpius.

Other elements, however, not noted or little noted before, both support and make more complex the role of Priapus in the shipwreck in particular.

¹ Sullivan 1968, 40–42, 63 and n. 2, 216; Walsh 1970, 76–78 and *passim*. Cf. Courtney 1991, 44–45. For the wrath theme as a product of Encolpius's own imagination, see Jenson 2004, 164–173 and *passim*.

These details suggest that Encolpius and Giton both function as figures for Priapus himself in this episode, and their disfiguring disguises foreshadow the destruction of the ship.

Archaeological evidence shows that Priapus as a deity was particularly connected by the Romans with ships and sailors.² Epigrams in the *Palatine Anthology* portray Priapus's role as a protector of sailors and mention images of him set up on rocks and beaches.³ A painting from the House of the Priest Amandus at Pompeii (I, VII, 7) shows an ithyphallic statue of Priapus on the shore and a galley at sea beyond.⁴ Evidence from ancient shipwrecks shows the presence of images of Priapus on board ships, perhaps in shrines to the deity. A small wooden statuette of Priapus as a youth was recovered from the Planier A shipwreck near Marseilles, dating from the first quarter of the first century A.D.⁵ While the erect phallus is now missing, the well-preserved remainder of the statue leaves no doubt as to its identity. Given the testimony of the *Palatine Anthology* epigrams, it seems likely that veneration of Priapus on board ships was by no means uncommon and perhaps quite widespread.

With this background in mind, it is possible to revisit a few elements of the shipboard adventures in the *Satyricon*. Encolpius and Giton are horrified when they discover that they have taken passage on board the ship of Lichas, with whom they have had a previous unhappy encounter, and they immediately begin meditating escape plans. One of the less extravagant is Eumolpus's suggestion that he roll them up in leather like luggage (*ego vos in duas iam pelles coniciam vincosque loris inter vestimenta pro sarcinis habebo*, 102,8), leaving the ends open for breathing, and then carry them off the ship at the next port. Michael Heseltine suggests this may be a parody of Cleopatra's famous ruse of having herself delivered to Caesar wrapped up in a rug.⁶ Encolpius emphatically and volubly rejects this plan, pointing out the obvious problems of staying hidden in such a tied-up position for any length

² I am most grateful to Harry Neilson for sharing with me his CAMWS paper of April 2000, which first acquainted me with much of this evidence. His work has now appeared as Neilson 2002.

³ Neilson 2002, 248–249; *Palatine Anthology* 10,4; 10,6; 10,7; 10,8.

⁴ Blanckenhagen 1990, pl. 59. Neilson 2002, 249–250 discusses the use of Priapus figures (which could be little more than pilings with a phallus attached) as markers for ship navigation.

⁵ Parker 1992, 315; Neilson 2002, 250–252.

⁶ See Heseltine's Loeb *ad loc.*; Plutarch, *Life of Caesar* 49.

of time. His climactic statement, though (at least as presently preserved), uses an interesting image:

*iuvenes adhuc laboris expertes statuarum ritu patiemur pannos et vin-
cla?* (102,12)

Shall we young men, inexperienced as we are at suffering, put up with rags and bonds, just like statues?

One irony lies in the fact that the plan they finally choose, to disguise themselves as branded slaves with shaved heads, comes very close to putting them in ‘rags and bonds,’ the situation Encolpius rejects here. More intriguing, though, is the image implied by *statuarum ritu*. Just as today, transporting statues in the ancient world would have required careful packing and wrapping. But what about the word *ritu*? It is true that this ablative simply meaning ‘in the manner of, like’ occurs already in Pacuvius, and the *OLD* even cites this passage in Petronius as one example for this colorless meaning.⁷ Yet one may wonder if the conjunction with statues does not reawaken older religious associations of the word *ritu*. The echo is very subtle, but many of those statues transported by sea would have been divine images, part of the continuing removal of sculpture from its original Greek contexts. Encolpius here refuses to allow himself and Giton to be changed from human beings to statues.

The question at least seems worth asking: statues of whom? As noted, the plan they finally settle on is to shave their heads, fake brands upon their faces with ink, and pretend to be slaves. This they carry out during the night – the night in which Lichas and Tryphaena have their pair of dreams about the fugitives. Let us return to that passage. Priapus’s speech, as quoted by Lichas, implies that Lichas has been praying to him for guidance and assistance: note particularly *quod*.⁸ Note also that it is not Neptune himself but specifically a statue which Tryphaena has seen at Baiae which tells her where to find Giton.⁹ Does this then imply that Lichas’s answer too comes from an image to which he has been praying?

⁷ *OLD* s.v. 2.

⁸ Heseltine notes that Frankel proposed to read *quem* for *quod*, but I follow the manuscripts and Mueller.

⁹ *Bais* <in> *tetrastylo* is Buechler’s conjecture for the manuscripts’ *Baistor asylo*. There is no doubt, however, that the *simulacrum* speaks.

Lichas as captain of the ship has religious responsibility for matters on board. Harry Neilson suggests that in fact a captain was in effect the religious head of a ship, just as the father in a Roman household was priest for that household.¹⁰ Lichas therefore decides to undertake a search of the ship to expiate Tryphaena's dream (*somnium expiavit*, 104,4), as a result of which the shaving of the fugitives' heads in the night is revealed by another passenger. Lichas determines they are to be flogged to appease the tutelary divinity of the ship (*ut tutela navis expiaretur*, 105,4). In the course of this beating Giton cries out. Tryphaena and her maids both recognize his voice. Lichas, in the famous parody of the nurse's recognition of Odysseus by his scar (made explicit by the text), recognizes Encolpius by seizing his crotch and feeling his genitals (*continuo ad inguina mea...movit officiosam manum*, 105,10). This of course explicates Encolpius's name (ἐν κόλπῳ), but we should also consider that he is recognized by what is after all Priapus's most significant feature.

Lichas is not as easily appeased as are the women, who plead for mercy for the fugitives. He is still very much disturbed by the shaving of their heads. The last thing he says in direct discourse before fighting breaks out among the factions on the ship is this remark, addressed to Encolpius:

cui deo crinem vovisti? pharmace, responde. (107,15)

To what god did you dedicate your hair? Answer me, you pariah.

Lichas still believes that the shaving of the heads was part of a religious ritual, and he fears a plot against his ship. While we should not behave as though Lichas has been reading modern structural or anthropological theory, still we can note the term he uses for Encolpius, *pharmace*, is very strong indeed.

The dispute on board indeed becomes violent and is only brought to a truce when Giton threatens self-mutilation and Encolpius, following suit, threatens suicide:

tunc fortissimus Giton ad virilia sua admovit novaculam infestam, minatus se abscisurum tot miseriarum causam, inhibuitque Tryphaena tam grande facinus non dissimulata missione. saepius ego cultrum tonsorium super iugulum meum posui, non magis me occisurus, quam Giton quod

¹⁰ Neilson 2002, 251.

minabatur facturus. audacius tamen ille tragoediam implebat, quia sciebat se illam habere novaculam, qua iam sibi cervicem praeciderat.

(108,10–11)

Then brave Giton turned a hostile razor against his manhood, threatening to amputate the cause of so many miseries, and Tryphaena averted such a great crime by a plea for mercy by no means faked. For my part, I put a barber's knife to my throat several time, no more intending to kill myself than Giton was about to do what he threatened. Still, he played the tragedy all the more boldly, because he knew he had the razor with which he'd cut his neck before.

One threat is clearly a variation on the other, but we should by no means minimize the fact that Giton threatens self-castration. Giton is in fact using a fake razor that was shown to be such in previous scene, but Tryphaena cannot know that the threat is not real. In the absence of the earlier narrative, we cannot be sure what Tryphaena's previous relationship with Giton has been, but the context certainly implies a sexual element in her interest. In the earlier scene with Quartilla, Encolpius has claimed that Giton is too young to have sexual relations with the little girl Pannychis, but there is no necessity to believe him; Tryphaena may well have not merely fallen in love with Giton but previously have had sexual relations with him. Giton may thus have been a Priapic figure earlier in the novel, but his threatened self-castration, if carried through, would in the most emphatic way possible destroy any possible identification of him with Priapus.

We return to the matter of hair, or lack thereof, which has so exercised Lichas. After a peace treaty is finally concluded, the maids of Tryphaena use false curls and make-up to restore both the original appearance of both Giton and Encolpius. Their mutilated images must be restored.

Yet peace is not complete. While Tryphaena has taken Giton back into her good graces, she continues to behave disdainfully toward Encolpius, whom we now learn was once her lover (*aliquando gratum sibi amatorem*, 113,8). Giton attempts to intervene on Encolpius's behalf. The text is quite lacunose here, but we have no indication that Giton succeeds.

The storm follows quickly thereafter, and the ship is set upon by wind and waves alike. In the midst of the fury Lichas's last words are an appeal to Encolpius:

Lichas trepidans ad me supinas porrigit manus et 'tu' inquit 'Encolpi, succurre periclitantibus, id est vestem illam divinam sistrumque redde navigio. per fidem, miserere, quemadmodum quidem soles.' et illum quidem vociferantem in mare ventus excussit, repetitumque infesto gurgite procella circumegit atque hausit. (114,4–6)

Lichas tremblingly extended his hands to me and said, 'Encolpius, save us in our peril: give the ship back that divine robe and rattle. Have mercy, as you always do.' Even as he was speaking, the wind knocked him into the sea, a squall twisted him round and round in the dire whirlpool and sucked him down.

Some commentators have suggested that the robe and sistrum were booty from an earlier theft, but Arrowsmith is surely right in viewing these as stolen from the patron goddess of the very ship they are on.¹¹ The sistrum implies that this goddess is Isis, for whom many Roman ships were named. A second century tomb painting from Ostia, for example, shows us a ship named the *Isis Geminiana*.¹² Encolpius has lived up to his reputation as a temple robber then:¹³ he has plundered the shipboard shrine.

Yet we should not then ascribe the shipwreck solely to a defiled and angry Isis. Neither, I submit, need the role of Priapus be seen solely in light of our heroes' previous crimes against him on shore, including their spying on Quartilla's rites. Priapus's role as a protector of ships and sea-farers may well be a vital part of the repertoire of experience of the expected reader of the *Satyricon*. Neilson even argues from the archaeological evidence of ven-

¹¹ Arrowsmith 1959. For an earlier, unrelated theft, see for example Branham and Kinney 1996; in the highly imaginative reconstruction of Jensson 2004, 177, Encolpius has indeed stolen the robe and sistrum from Isis on board, but on a much earlier occasion than the episode including the shipwreck!

¹² Illustrated in Meiggs 1973, 295, fig. 25. The widely available Balme and Morwood 1973, 73 offers a color photograph. I am grateful to my colleague Garth Tissol for the reference to Meiggs.

¹³ Which he later explicitly claims in a letter to Circe at Croton: *hominem occidi, templum violavi* (130,2). Courtney 1991, 37 pronounces this claim 'metaphorical,' but the only evidence on these claims he cites (Encolpius's statement at 81,3, *hospitem occidi*, misquoted by Courtney) tells against this view. No Roman text labels a shipboard shrine a *templum*, but the definition of the term as a space set apart for sacred business is fairly broad (*OLD s.v.*). One wonders if the ship itself as a whole might be the temple. Not only is Priapus a deity who comes from the east by ship, but Griffith 2002 makes the interesting case that the Greeks might have thought of temples as the ships in which the gods travelled.

eration of Priapus on board two wrecked trading ships in those waters that his worship may be particularly connected with southern Gaul and the trade routes from there.¹⁴ The lost portions of the novel may have identified the home port out of which Lichas (and Tryphaena?) sailed. Even without such a specific connection, however, it is no great stretch of the reader's imagination to suggest that offenses against a ship and its captain might be offenses against Priapus as well.

Those offenses are further embodied in the fugitives. The text offers us verbal and visual clues which strongly associate both Encolpius and Giton with the hyperphallic figure of Priapus himself. Their self-mutilation through shaving their heads and disfiguring their faces thus defiles the image of Priapus as well, in a way that false curls and mascara will not repair. Lichas's fears about the religious implications of their actions will not have seemed unfounded for a Roman audience, whatever Petronius's own views on the subject. Priapus, it would seem, had much to be annoyed about.¹⁵

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¹⁴ Neilson 2002, 252. Neilson indeed cites the offense against Priapus in the lost portion of the *Satyricon* preceding our text and the theme of his wrath in his argument, but his other evidence suffices to draw a connection to southern Gaul without Petronius. It is therefore not a circular argument to suggest that the Gallic connection may be known to Petronius' audience.

¹⁵ I am grateful to audiences at CAMWS, the New York Classical Club, and The College of Wooster for their responses to previous versions of this theme. Although whatever errors remain are, alas, mine own, I hope the result does nothing to disfigure one of the navigational markers we all sail by in the seas of the ancient novel, Gareth Schmeling.

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