

Petronius' *Satyrica* 24.7: Quartilla's *asellus*¹

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In chapters 16–26 of Petronius' *Satyrica*, the trio of Encolpius, Ascyltus, and Giton receive a visit from Quartilla, a priestess of Priapus, because they, uninitiated into the cult of Priapus, had recently witnessed illicitly rites conducted by Quartilla. Because of this “crime” she visits them for two purposes: to warn them that they must maintain silence about what they witnessed (17.7), and to cure herself of Tertian Fever (17.7), which some commentators interpret as “frigidity”,² brought on by the crime committed by the trio. Although she does not state that she is there to punish them for their *inexpiabile scelus* (“inexpiable crime” 17.6), she conducts a *Priapi genio pervigilium* (“vigil to the guiding spirit of Priapus” 21.7), many of whose activities (including the application and drinking of aphrodisiacs, rape, and a wedding) are obviously meant to cure herself and perhaps even to expiate their crime.

On (presumably) day two of the vigil, Quartilla kisses and fondles the young Giton, saying,

“haec” inquit “belle cras in promulside libidinis nostrae militabit; hodie enim post asellum diaria non sumo.”

(She said) “This will serve well tomorrow in the antipasto of our lust. To be sure, today I am taking no daily rations after a little donkey” 24.7 (literally translated).³

¹ I should like to thank G. Bucher, G. Schmeling, the anonymous readers and the editor of *AN* for their useful criticism of and suggestions for an earlier draft of this paper.

² Schmeling 1971, 352; Sullivan 1968, 48.

³ Latin text: Müller 2003. Various translators have rendered the Latin into English thus:

While the first part of the metaphor, focused on *promulsidae*, is easy to interpret, the second half, centered on *asellum*, raises a number of questions. Most scholars agree that the metaphor is clearly sexual in meaning. Quartilla seems to indicate that she has been recently satisfied sexually and does not wish to partake of sex in small portions or mundane sex (*diaria*). The difference in mundane and super sex could be owing to quality, i.e., performance, or simply quantity, i.e., the size of the penis.⁴ The Romans, and indubitably the lusty Quartilla, generally preferred larger penises to smaller ones.⁵ It is unclear from the extant fragments, however, with whom or even whether Quartilla has had sex.

This being said, what could Quartilla mean by *post asellum*?⁶

Asellum as a delicacy

Post asellum might simply mean “after the extravagant meal of an ass or a fish.” We are told that Maecenas instituted the practice of serving donkeys’ foals to his guests (Pliny *NH* 8.170). *Asellus* might also refer to a rare fish

“This will make a good starter to rouse our desire tomorrow, since I’ve already had the donkey today, I don’t want small rations” (Jensson 2004: 131);

‘These will make a good starter to rouse my appetite in tomorrow’s encounter,’ she said. ‘As I’ve already had the fish course today, I don’t want dry bread.’ (Walsh 1997);

“This will serve to whet our appetites tomorrow. I don’t think I’d enjoy a sardine after today’s swordfish!” (Branham and Kinney 1996);

‘Tomorrow this will serve nicely as hors d’oeuvre to tempt my appetite,’ she said. ‘For the present, I don’t want any ordinary stuffing after such a nice cod-piece.’ (Sullivan 1977);

“Demain, dit-elle, voilà qui s’escrimera très gentiment en hors-d’œuvre à nos plaisirs; car pour aujourd’hui j’ai goûté d’un trop bon plat pour tâter de cette maigre pitance” (“Tomorrow, she said, here is what will work with might and main very nicely as an hors-d’oeuvre to our pleasures; because for today I have tasted too good of a dish to touch this meagre ration of food.” (Ernout 1962, trans. D. Vanderboegh);

“Tomorrow,” she laughed, “this will make a fine antipasto for my lechery. But today’s *entrée* stuffed me so full, I couldn’t swallow even this little tidbit now.” (Arrowsmith 1959).

⁴ Courtney 2001, 69 and Schmeling 1971, 353 see the reference to the donkey’s sexual vigor, while Jensson 2004, 131, n. 299, and Aragosti 1988, 121 to the donkey’s large penis.

⁵ See Williams 1999, 86–95.

⁶ It is not odd that Quartilla uses *diaria* (“daily rations”) metaphorically to indicate something sexual because she often uses terms for food to imply sexual roles or practices. Cf., e.g., *embasicoetas* (“drinking cup”) “catamite” 24.1–4); *in promulsidae libidinis* (“in the antipasto of lust” 24.7).

(see Pliny *NH* 32.145; Varro *L* 5.77). Quartilla seems to extend the metaphor of food to indicate sexual practices, saying that after an extravagant meal of a donkey or an exquisite fish, i.e., super sex, she will not partake of ordinary sex. This interpretation leaves open the question, however, of Quartilla's sexual partner during the vigil.

Post asellum as "after sex with Encolpius"

Several scholars take it for granted that Quartilla's *post asellum* refers to sex with Encolpius.⁷ In the extant work, no mention is made of the size of Giton's genitals, and therefore, we may assume that they are not extraordinary but are *diaria*.⁸ On the other hand, Lichas recognizes the disguised Encolpius by his genitals (105.9), which presumably resemble in size those of an *asel-lus*. Encolpius certainly cannot be the *asellus* in the word's sense of having the sexual vigor of a donkey, however, because we know that he is impotent at this party and might have been earlier in the novel because of another offense against Priapus.⁹ On day one of the vigil, he, the presumed speaker, mentions: *Sollicitavit inguina mea mille iam mortibus frigida* ("She rubbed my groin, cold now from a thousand deaths" 20.2). In addition, we know that he drank all of the aphrodisiac intended for two or more people, which probably had the opposite effect in large quantities (20.7).¹⁰ On (presumably)

⁷ Jenson 2004, 131, n. 299; Courtney 2001, 69; and Schmeling 1971, 353.

⁸ Jenson 2004, 131 interprets Quartilla's words to indicate size. Quartilla does not want something small since she has "already had something bigger that day."

⁹ Conte 1996, 95 ff. thinks that Encolpius' impotence might have begun on the night when he disrupted Quartilla's rituals.

¹⁰ Faraone 1990, 115 argues that Quartilla laughs after being informed of Encolpius' drinking of the double dose of *saturion* because she knows that double doses of aphrodisiacs often result in impotence. The overdose of some aphrodisiacs produces impotence for up to three months. Faraone 1990, 116 conjectures that this may be the real source of Encolpius' impotence and not the wrath of Priapus. Also, see Faraone 1999, 129 for a list of drugs and the effects according to the doses that were used by the Greeks as love magic. While *saturion* is not included in this list, there is no reason to suppose that it, like the other aphrodisiacs, did not produce such things as sleep, paralysis or death in "larger" or "very large" doses. Faraone 1999, 125 contradicts his earlier statement: "*saturion*...if taken in too large an amount or over too long a period, produces...satyriasis." I, however, have found no ancient source that indicates the effects of *saturion* in large doses. Firstly, we do not know the specific *saturion* that Encolpius drank. Faraone 1999, 20 notes that *saturion* was "apparently a general name for aphrodisiac plants in the orchid family." Secondly, he presumably drank a dose meant for two or more people. Because of Quar-

day two, he says that he is attacked by a catamite who *super inguina mea diu multumque frustra moluit* ("over my groin he ground a lot and for a long time in vain" 23.5).¹¹ Also, when he and Quartilla witness Giton's marriage rites, he is passive as Quartilla steals kisses. In fact, the extant fragments contain no mention of Encolpius being aroused at the vigil.

Ascylltus, on the other hand, seems the likely choice for the *asellus* reference¹² and would aptly be referred to by this noun, for he, like a donkey, is characterized as having a large penis (92.7–9). Still, the fact that in this episode he is painted with an aphrodisiac (22.1) and given one to drink (24.4) might suggest that he *needed* an aphrodisiac, i.e., that he too was not functioning well.

Furthermore, twelve pieces of evidence in the extant fragments suggest that Quartilla's role in this vigil is as a director¹³ and not an active participant: 1) she orders that no one be admitted into the inn until she obtains her cure from Tertian Fever (19.2); 2) Encolpius begs her to complete her plan more quickly (20.1); 3) *Quartilla ballaenaceam tenens virgam alteque succincta iussit infelicibus dari missionem* ("Quartilla, holding a whalebone wand and with her dress girded high, ordered release be given to the luckless ones" 21.2); 4) she, arguably, moves the orgy to her own home on day two of the vigil;¹⁴ 5) she reminds the trio that they are not allowed to sleep during the vigil (21.7); 6) she revives the party after everyone has passed out (23.1); 7) Encolpius asks her for an *embasicoetas* (24.1) and 8) she orders that Ascylltus also receive one (24.4); 9) Giton is afraid to refuse her request for a kiss (24.6–7) and even lets her fondle him (24.7); 10) she is the one who decides to stage a wedding between Giton and Pannychis (25.1); 11) she

tilla's amusement upon learning that Encolpius has drunk the entire glass of aphrodisiac, the joke seems to be on Encolpius; rather than performing better he will not be able to perform at all.

¹¹ Adams 1982, 153: "At Petron. 23.5 the sense of *molo* is different: 'super inguina mea diu multumque frustra moluit' (of the activities of a *cinaedus*). It may be a graphic metaphor for masturbation, or for the motions of the *cinaedus* astride Encolpius."

¹² Courtney 2001, 70, and Aragosti 1988, 121 both recognize him as a possibility.

¹³ Panayotakis 1994, 326, n. 26: "Quartilla is also the stage-director. She is to be held responsible for everything...In fact, as the narrative shows (21.2; 21.7; 23.1; 24.4; 25.1), she is more of a director than of an actress...." Slater 1990, 44, likewise, observes that Quartilla watches more than participates in the revels she organized.

¹⁴ See Ciaffi 1955, 31 ff., and Courtney 2001, 68.

pulls Giton into the wedding chamber (26.2); 12) she drags Encolpius to the chink in the door to witness the wedding night spectacle (26.4–5).¹⁵

Asellum as the raped Encolpius

It is striking that Quartilla chooses to use a metaphor with *asellus*, the animal sacred to Priapus and traditionally sacrificed to him (Ovid *Fast.* 1.391; 6.345 ff.).¹⁶ On the heels of the rape of Encolpius (to be discussed below), a fitting Priapic punishment,¹⁷ perhaps we might better interpret Quartilla's words, *post asellum*, to mean "after the sacrifice of Encolpius to Priapus".

At the vigil a catamite attacks Encolpius at least twice: both verbs and phrases used to describe each attack strongly suggest that Encolpius was raped.¹⁸ Encolpius says of one assault: *extortis nos clunibus cecidit* ("he beat us with his grinding buttocks" 21.2).¹⁹ Adams (1982, 145) notes that "*Caedo* sometimes implies a sexual act seen as a punishment." A parallel use of *caedo* is found in Catullus 56.7: *hunc ego, si placet Dionae, / pro telo rigida mea cecidi* ("If it pleases Dione, I have struck this one with my stiffy instead of my spear"). After the second assault, the narrator tells us: *equum cinaedus mutavit* ("the catamite changed horse" 24.4), a metaphor for sex with, here, the *cinaedus* on top. Adams (1982, 165) notes that in most examples where the metaphor "ride" is used, the rider is a woman but there is "no great difference between this *schema*, and that at Petron.24.4, where the rider is a

¹⁵ Schmeling 1971, 348 surmises that the "cure" Quartilla seeks for her frigidity and Encolpius' impotence is "to see the Priapic ritual of defloration." Because it is not Quartilla's idea to have the wedding, however, this seems unlikely. Courtney 2001, 66, views the orgy as the cure; Slater 1990, 44, thinks that her only sexual contacts are with Giton at 24.5–7 and with Encolpius at the chink in the door at 26.4–5.

¹⁶ See Herter 1932, 250–55; 265–266.

¹⁷ In the *Carmina Priapea*, Priapus repeatedly threatens thieves with rape or curses them with desire and no sexual outlet (e.g., 5, 6, 23, 47). In the scholium to Aristophanes' *Acharnians* (243a), another fertility god, Dionysos, causes a disease to fall upon the genitals of the men of Attica who had not received the god with honor.

¹⁸ A problem with Petronian sexual scenes is, as Gill 1973, 178 notes, "The more physical and intimate the actions are, the more obliquely they are expressed."

¹⁹ See OLD s.v. *caedo* 2, and Adams 1982, 145–46. Courtney 2001, 68 interprets this scene differently: *caedo*, which "normally indicates the action of the penetrator with an undertone of punishment (Adams, *Latin Sexual Vocabulary* 145–6)...is here applied to the penetrated."

cinaedus....”²⁰ In both instances Encolpius plays the passive role. Later on the third day (26.7) he mentions that flight was better than a free meal because of their numerous “dug out” wounds (*tot vulneribus confossis*, 26.7). Adams (1982, 152) writes that the metaphor of “wound” while often used of the deflowering of a bride, is not restricted to this use and offers as example Ausonius *Epigr.*p. 341 P. ‘*peruersae ueneris postico uulnere fossor*’ (“a digger of perverse sex with a posterior wound”). Encolpius’ rape can be interpreted as a sacrifice to the god in payment for his violation of the god’s rites.

Thus what we have in this scenario is Quartilla indicating through this metaphor that she is not interested now in mundanely punishing Giton (although this changes at someone else’s suggestion of a wedding), after such a fitting punishment for Encolpius. Furthermore, while I found no uses of *diaria sumo* in a religious context, *sumo* can be used for ‘exacting’ a punishment (OLD s.v., *sumo* 6 b). Sometimes the word for “punishment” is a stretch, however, as in Silius Italicus 4.762: *talia perpersi...venere lacus, ubi deinde per arma sumeret amissi numerosa piacula uisus* (“Having endured such things, they came to the lake where thereafter (Hannibal) through the midst of arms, would take numerous propitiary victims for his lost sight”). It may be argued that Petronius’ use of *sumo* here with *diaria* suggests retribution.

In this light Quartilla’s *post asellum diaria non sumo* would mean, “I won’t honor the god with such an ordinary dedication after a sacrifice.” Interpreting *post asellum* as ‘after the rape/punishment of Encolpius’ maintains Quartilla’s role as director of the vigil in which she need not have had sex with anyone present. Her word choice then is designed to remind us archly of one purpose of this vigil, the revenge for the trio’s *inexpiabile* crime. Hence, *hodie enim post asellum diaria non sumo* is a fitting pronouncement that ties in the larger theme of the revenge of Priapus.²¹

²⁰ Adams 1982, 166 cites as a further example of a *cinaedus* being a “rider” a graffito, CIL IV.1825: “*Cosmus equitaes magnus cinaedus et fellator: esuris apertis mari(bus)*” (“Cosmus, great rider, catamite and performer of oral sex: you hunger for uncovered males”).

²¹ See also Slater 1990, 40: “Purely on the level of plot, it is often asserted that the sexual scenes in the *Satyricon*, and in particular the Quartilla episode, serve to articulate the theme of the wrath of Priapus against Encolpius.”

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