

A Petronian Brothel in *The Great Gatsby*¹

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*But, when they depart from his brain,
These enchantments by which he's obsessed,
And Truth comes again with her train
Restoring perspective and pain,
The phantasm lives to the last,
The mind dwells with shades of the past.*
– Petronius, *Satyricon* 128,6 (Firebaugh)

Amid the chorus of intertextual echoes to be heard in *The Great Gatsby*, the resonance between this novel and Petronius's *Satyricon* is a well-known feature of American literary history.² In letters to his editor, Max Perkins, F. Scott Fitzgerald suggested as a potential title *Trimalchio in West Egg*, or perhaps just *Trimalchio*; after the book had gone to press under its current designation, he worried that '*Trimalchio* might have been best after all'.³ This proposed title refers to the fabulously rich ex-slave who hosts an ostentatious dinner party in the longest and

¹ I wish to thank Helen Morales, James Tatum, Gareth Schmeling, and the anonymous reviewers at *Ancient Narrative* for their insightful comments and suggestions. Stephen Ferguson and the staff at Princeton University Library provided valuable archival assistance.

² Although it has become fashionable among Classicists to refer to the *Satyricon* of Petronius, I retain the conventional title, *Satyricon* [*libri*], the only name for this ancient text that Fitzgerald and his contemporaries would have known. The cacophony of literary echoes that critics have identified in *The Great Gatsby* is discussed by Roulston (1984). Still, a surprisingly limited number of studies have addressed directly the reception of Petronius in Fitzgerald's work. Most important are Briggs 1999 and 2000; Drennan 1989; Endres 2009; Fraser 1984; Kumamoto 2001; MacKendrick 1950; Sklenar 2007–2008; and Slater 2011. Also see the bibliographies of Briggs 1999, 234–235 and Endres 2003. Harrison 2013 provides a useful introduction to the influence of Petronius on English novels other than *The Great Gatsby*, with a guide to further reading. An unpublished PhD thesis by Byrd (1996) explores satirical treatments of the *nouveau riche* in Petronius, Molière, and Fitzgerald.

³ Fitzgerald and Perkins 1971, 81, 85, 94, and 96. See West in Fitzgerald (2000, xvii) and Briggs 2000 on the back-and-forth between Fitzgerald and Perkins about the title.

most complete portion of the *Satyricon*, an episode known as the *Cena Trimalchionis*.⁴ Petronius's caricature of the *nouveau riche* upstart produces a Classical iteration of Jay Gatsby, who lives in a mansion and throws extravagant parties despite lacking a respectable pedigree. When these lavish affairs suddenly come to a halt, Fitzgerald's narrator, Nick Carraway, remarks of Gatsby that 'as obscurely as it had begun, his career as Trimalchio was over'.⁵

Anchored by this direct reference, the descriptive and thematic parallels between Gatsby and Trimalchio range from the décor of their overbuilt homes to their capacity to symbolize a conflict between wealth and status.⁶ At the same time, as Robert Sklenar has shown, points of divergence between the two men lead to intriguing conclusions.⁷ Whereas Trimalchio marches drunkenly to the beat of his stomach, Gatsby cultivates an aesthetic that is less wedded to the carnivalesque.⁸ Tom Buchanan absorbs much of the crassness, drunkenness, bunk philosophy, and masculine violence that characterize the host of the *Cena*.⁹ Trimalchio shares Gatsby's role as a self-made man, but also illuminates the vulgarity that routinely erupts through the surface of Tom's aristocratic privilege.

In light of Trimalchio's role as an avatar for Jay Gatsby, critics who read Fitzgerald against the *Satyricon* understandably focus on the *Cena*, often to the exclusion of other episodes. A handful of studies concentrate on Petronius's narrator, Encolpius, who recounts his adventures in imperial Italy in ways that resonate with Nick's description of the social and sexual landscape of 1920s New York.¹⁰ However, most replicate the assumption succinctly expressed by Ward Briggs that 'however much of the ancient novel Fitzgerald read, it is clear that for him (as for many), *The Satyricon* means simply its most famous and best preserved episode'.¹¹ True to form, the voracious, flamboyant, egocentric Trimalchio has dominated discussions about how these two novels can be set in dialogue with each other.¹²

⁴ Petr. 26,7–79.

⁵ Fitzgerald 1925, 113.

⁶ MacKendrick (1950) catalogues similarities in 'the method (detailed reporting of décor and incident), the aim (social satire), and the experience (progressive disillusion) of Petronius and Fitzgerald', primarily as they concern Trimalchio's banquet.

⁷ Sklenar 2007–2008.

⁸ Sklenar 2007–2008, 121–122; see, e.g., the portrayal of Gatsby at Fitzgerald 1925, 48 and 50.

⁹ Sklenar 2007–2008, 123–125.

¹⁰ See Fraser 1984, Endres 2009, and Slater 2011; also see Fusillo 2008, 331. Connections between Nick and Encolpius are discussed in more detail below.

¹¹ Briggs 1999, 229.

¹² Trimalchio has exerted a similarly totalizing force over the historical imagination, a phenomenon which art historian Lauren Hackworth Petersen aptly calls 'Trimalchio vision'; see Petersen 2006, 6–10.

However, upon closer inspection, other Petronian figures shed light on Fitzgerald's depiction of mortal desires and failings. The epigraph to this paper comes from an episode in which Encolpius laments his frustrated love for Circe, a woman named for the bewitching daughter of Helios and endowed with the voice of a Siren.¹³ These lines could easily describe Gatsby's delusional pursuit of Daisy Buchanan, a 'dead dream' that persists to the bitter end.¹⁴ As Gatsby's body turns 'with little ripples that were hardly the shadows of waves', we are reminded that he 'paid a high price for living too long with a single dream'.¹⁵ This scene evokes another moment in the *Satyricon* when Encolpius ruminates on the futility of human designs. Having spotted the corpse of a mariner 'turning around in a gentle eddy', he opines: 'Such is the end of mortal's plans, such is the outcome of great ambitions!'¹⁶ Short of implying a systematic relationship between the *Satyricon* and *The Great Gatsby*, these intertexts suggest the utility of a comparative reading that ventures beyond the confines of the *Cena*.

To test the limits of such an approach, I examine the resonance between two scenes that feature a sexually powerful woman. The orgy that ensnares Encolpius at the brothel of a procuress named Quartilla aligns in key respects with the raucous affair that Nick attends at Myrtle Wilson's pied-à-terre in Manhattan.¹⁷ Sklenar argues that Fitzgerald's juxtaposition of Myrtle's apartment with a more elegant soiree at Gatsby's mansion creates 'a doublet of Petronius's *Cena*'.¹⁸ However, the scene at Myrtle's flat generates an erotic charge that resonates more strongly with the Quartilla episode, which already comprises a 'X-Rated dress rehearsal for Trimalchio's dinner'.¹⁹ When brought to bear on *The Great Gatsby*, the brothel sequence constructs desire in a way that reinforces Myrtle's status as a libidinous woman who emasculates all but the most virile men in her presence.

¹³ Petronius 1922, 311. On the Siren-like qualities of Daisy Buchanan's voice, see Settle (1985).

¹⁴ Fitzgerald 1925, 134. The likeness between Daisy and Circe suggests that Petronius may have provided a filter through which Homer reached *The Great Gatsby*, perhaps via Joyce's *Ulysses*. While intriguing, this question lies beyond the scope of the current study. On Fitzgerald's relationship to ancient epic, especially Virgil, see Briggs 1999, 230–234.

¹⁵ Fitzgerald 1925, 161–162.

¹⁶ Petronius 1922, 271. For reasons explained below, all of my translations are taken from Firebaugh's *Satyricon*, published in 1922.

¹⁷ Fitzgerald 1925, 28–38; Petr. 16–26,6 = Petronius 1922, 43–63.

¹⁸ Sklenar 2007–2008, 124–125; cited but not critiqued directly by Endres 2009, 66.

¹⁹ Rimell 2013, 72; cf. Elsner (2007, 179), who points out that the voyeurism in this passage looks ahead to Petr. 140.

A brief digression into Fitzgerald's archives should help to dispel the idea that he equated the *Satyricon* with the *Cena*. Like Amory Blaine in *This Side of Paradise*, Fitzgerald almost certainly dabbled in the 'racier sections' of Petronius, including the episode at Quartilla's brothel.²⁰ This observation in no way proves that the author of *The Great Gatsby* deliberately fashioned the gathering at Myrtle's flat after a Petronian orgy. However, along with a consideration of the editions through which Fitzgerald encountered the *Satyricon*, it draws the spotlight away from Trimalchio to other members of Petronius's diverse cast.

As is well known, Fitzgerald's training would not have prepared him to read Petronius in the original. By his own admission, his laziness as a student of Latin excluded him from an intellectual pleasure that he likened (rather naively) to 'a blessed evening with a lovely girl'.²¹ Fortunately, Michael Heseltine's Loeb translation had appeared in 1913, finally making Petronius widely available in English, despite leaving the juiciest sections in Latin.²² Fitzgerald's copy of the Loeb is now housed in the Department of Rare Books and Special Collections at Princeton University, which acquired much of the author's personal library, along with his manuscripts, galley proofs, correspondence, and other papers.²³ In addition to Heseltine, Fitzgerald probably had access to W. C. Firebaugh's uncensored English *Satyricon*, printed amid public controversy in 1922 by Boni & Liveright, a New York firm where his friend Tom Smith was editor-in-chief.²⁴

²⁰ Fitzgerald 1920, 103.

²¹ See the letter cited by MacKendrick 1950, 307; Briggs 1999, 227.

²² Petronius 1913; Richlin 2013, 99. For a bibliographical history of translations in English and other languages, see Schmeling and Stuckey 1977, 77–125.

²³ The catalogue of books from Fitzgerald's library is available at <http://libweb2.princeton.edu/rbsc2/misc/Fitzgerald.pdf> (accessed August 6, 2015). The Loeb was probably among the materials originally deposited 'for safekeeping' at Princeton in 1943 during negotiations with Fitzgerald's estate. According to a library memo dated May 19, 1955, 'It was apparent that when the Fitzgerald books were moved from the old library at least one box had lost its identification and become separated from the others' (document provided by Stephen Ferguson, private correspondence). The memo identifies the Loeb translation of Petronius's *Satyricon* and Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis* as one of these misplaced items. The move from the old library occurred in 1947–1948, before Frances 'Scottie' Fitzgerald had finalized the deal with Princeton regarding her father's archive and returned to campus to select the books which she would keep; see Bruccoli 1988–1989, 36–37. Because the Loeb had 'lost its identification' in the move, Scottie would have had no choice but to leave it to the university.

²⁴ For an account of the controversy surrounding the publication of Firebaugh's *Satyricon*, see Briggs 1999, 226–229; see also Briggs 2000, 582–583. Although Firebaugh's translation does not appear in Fitzgerald's personal library, most scholars believe that he read this version. Briggs (1999, 229, n. 13) does not seem to know that Fitzgerald owned the Loeb, nor does Endres (2009, 76, n. 2).

Fitzgerald's copy of the Loeb contains three pencil underlines in the body of the work, as well as his signature on the flyleaf (see images 1 and 2).²⁵ All of these underlines appear below Latin text in the first sections of the *Satyricon* that Heseltine deemed unfit to translate. During the orgy at Quartilla's brothel, the English breaks off at the mention of Encolpius's unresponsive genitals:²⁶

The maid, whose name was Psyche, carefully spread a blanket on the floor.
Sollicitavit inguina mea mille iam mortibus frigida....

Further down the same page, a catamite attacks with his buttocks and 'rank kisses' until Quartilla intervenes:²⁷

At last there arrived a low fellow in a fine brown suit with a waistband....
Modo extortis nos clunibus cecidit, modo basiis olidissimis inquinavit, donec Quartilla, balaenaceam tenens virgam alteque succincta iussit infelicibus dari missionem....

A few pages later, still in the Quartilla episode, a single word, *embasicoetan*, has been underlined by the same hand.²⁸

The markings in Fitzgerald's Loeb evoke the image of a curious reader whose appetite has been whetted by turns in the narrative that are clearly salacious but in a language he barely understands.²⁹ If Fitzgerald started with Heseltine, these expurgations may have prompted him to seek the help of Firebaugh's more thorough translation. Along with the complete English text, rendered in colorful prose, Firebaugh's two-volume *Satyricon* boasts graphic illustrations by Norman Lindsay and long explanatory notes on topics like 'Impotence', 'Legacy Hunting',

²⁵ Images are reprinted with permission of the Princeton University Library.

²⁶ Petronius 1913, 29. I have reproduced in these quotations the underlining found in Fitzgerald's copy of the Loeb. The Latin is translated: 'and sought to secure an erection by fondling my member, which was already a thousand times colder than death' (Petronius 1922, 49).

²⁷ 'One minute he nearly gored us to death with his writhing buttocks, and the next, he befouled us so with his stinking kisses that Quartilla, with her robe tucked high, held up her whalebone wand and ordered him to give the unhappy wretches quarter' (Petronius 1922, 51).

²⁸ Petronius 1913, 35.

²⁹ In the absence of detailed evidence regarding the provenance of this Loeb, the idea that Fitzgerald made these markings in his own hand must remain speculative, if highly plausible.

SATYRICON

The maid, whose name was Psyche, carefully spread a blanket on the floor. Sollicitavit inguina mea mille iam mortibus frigida Ascyrtos had buried his head in his cloak. I suppose he had warning that it is dangerous to pry into other people's secrets. . . .

The maid brought two straps out of her dress and tied our feet with one and our hands with the other. . . .

The thread of our talk was broken. "Come," said Ascyrtos, "do not I deserve a drink?" The maid was given away by my laughter at this. She clapped her hands and said, "I put one by you, young man. Did you drink the whole of the medicine yourself?" "Did he really?" said Quartilla, "did Encolpius drink up the whole of our loving-cup?" Her sides shook with delightful laughter. . . . Even Giton had to laugh at last, I mean when the little girl took him by the neck and showered countless kisses on his unresisting lips. . . .

We wanted to cry out for pain, but there was no one to come to the rescue, and when I tried to cry "Help, all honest citizens!" Psyche pricked my cheek with a hair-pin, while the girl threatened Ascyrtos with a wet sponge which she had soaked in an aphrodisiac. . . .

At last there arrived a low fellow in a fine brown suit with a waistband. . . .

Modo extortis nos clunibus cecidit, modo basiis olidissimis inquinavit, donec Quartilla balaenaceam tenens virgam alteque succincta iussit infelicibus dari missionem

Image 1. Pencil underlines in Fitzgerald's copy of Heseltine's Loeb translation of Petronius, p. 29.

SATYRICON

embasicoetan iusseras dari." Complosit illa tenerius manus et "O" inquit "hominem acutum atque urbanitatis vernaculae fontem. Quid? tu non intellexeras cinaedum embasicoetan vocari?" Deinde ut contubernali meo melius succederet, "Per fidem" inquam "vestram, Ascylos in hoc triclinio solus ferias agit?" "Ita" inquit Quartilla "et Ascylo embasicoetas detur." Ab hac voce equum cinaedus mutavit transituque ad comitem meum facto clunibus eum basiisque distrivit. | Stabat inter haec Giton et risu dissolvebat *LO* ilia sua. Itaque conspicata eum Quartilla, cuius esset puer, diligentissima sciscitatione quaesivit. Cum ego fratrem meum esse dixissem, "Quare ergo" inquit "me non basiavit?" Vocatumque ad se in osculum applicuit. Mox manum etiam demisit in sinum et pertractato vasculo tam rudi "Haec" inquit "belle cras in promulsidae libidinis nostrae militabit: hodie enim post asellum diaria non sumo."

Cum haec diceret, ad aurem eius Psyche ridens *25* accessit, et cum dixisset nescio quid, "Ita, ita" inquit Quartilla "bene admonuisti. Cur non, quia bellissima occasio est, devirginatur Pannychis nostra?" Continuoque producta est puella satis bella et quae non plus quam septem annos habere videbatur, [et] ea ipsa quae primum cum Quartilla in cellam venerat nostram. Plaudentibus ergo universis et postulantibus nuptias [fecerunt] obstupui ego et nec Gitona, verecundissimum puerum, sufficere huic petulantiae affirmavi, nec

Image 2. Pencil underline in Fitzgerald's copy of Heseltine's Loeb translation of Petronius, p. 35.

‘Circe’s Voice’, and ‘Greek Love’.³⁰ On account of these merits, Firebaugh likely overtook Heseltine as the primary mediator of Fitzgerald’s engagement with the *Satyricon*.³¹ Nevertheless, the motivation to consult an uncensored edition would have stemmed from a desire to read more fluently about brothels, genitals, buttocks, and catamites, not about Trimalchio’s banquet.

Fitzgerald’s probable interest in the Quartilla episode occupies a second order of importance, comparable to knowledge about his wearing women’s clothing and expressing contempt for ‘fairies’.³² A likeness remains to be drawn, on the basis of intertextual echoes, between the orgy that takes place under Quartilla’s direction and the party at Mrs Wilson’s apartment. Many of the elements that are common to these scenes circulate widely in literature, and Petronius’s depiction of Quartilla may have influenced the characterization of Myrtle indirectly. Nevertheless, the act of reading these episodes side by side produces a number of suggestive correlations. Framed by similarities in structure and descriptive detail, Quartilla and Myrtle share the role of an oversexed woman whose libido alienates men of ambiguous virility – most importantly, the narrator.

In the *Satyricon*, Encolpius describes how he, Ascyrtos, and their slave Giton are accused by Quartilla of having witnessed the secret rites of Priapus. The young men agree to keep quiet about what they saw and to administer an unspecified medicine that Quartilla claims will cure the fever she has suffered since the infraction.³³ Quartilla then inebriates her victims and ensnares them in an orgy that includes *inter alia* two catamites and the staged marriage of Giton to a prepubescent slave girl.³⁴ Having escaped the brothel, our heroes proceed in the next fragment to the house of Trimalchio, where they become embroiled in another demonstration of human excess, this time around food and money.

In *The Great Gatsby*, the gathering at Myrtle’s flat comes second in a series of social events, the first being Nick’s visit to the Buchanans’ East Egg estate and the third his induction into the wonderland that Gatsby has constructed for

³⁰ See notes listed at Petronius 1922, ix-x. The attractiveness of Firebaugh’s prose is exemplified by sentences like this one, at the end of §19: ‘Then our determination gave place to astonishment, and death, sure and certain, began to obscure the eyes of suffering’. Compare Heseltine’s more sober rendering (1913, 27): ‘But then all our resolution yielded to astonishment, and the darkness of certain death began to fall on our unhappy eyes’. The Latin reads: *Tunc vero excidit omnis constantia attonitis et mors non dubia miserorum oculos coepit obducere*.

³¹ Cf. Briggs 1999, 229; Endres 2009, 76, n. 2.

³² As noted, for example, by Froehlich 2010, 82; Wasiolek 1992, 22; cf. Brucoli 2002, 59 and 275.

³³ Petronius 1922, 43–47.

³⁴ Petronius 1922, 48–63.

Daisy.³⁵ In the intervening pages, Nick encounters a drunk and imperious Tom riding the train to New York. Tom compels him to stop in the ‘valley of ashes’ to collect Myrtle from her husband’s gas station, and the group makes its way to the Manhattan apartment that Tom keeps for his mistress. Seen through the eyes of a hesitant but intoxicated Nick, there ensues a whiskey-soaked evening of sex, violence, and unsophisticated conversation that both piques and repels the narrator. At the end of the night, Nick finds himself in the bedroom of Myrtle’s effeminate neighbor, Mr McKee, whereupon his story trails off into fragments.

The structure of the brothel and *Cena* in Petronius help to elucidate some of the ways in which Myrtle’s apartment functions as an eroticized precursor to Nick’s first party at Gatsby’s mansion. In the *Satyricon*, Quartilla oversees a gathering where the central goal is to manifest Eros in a relentlessly material sense.³⁶ By contrast, Trimalchio plays out his obsessions with food and money but allows sexual pleasure to fall under the radar. Although Trimalchio proudly announces that “‘I was my master’s ‘mistress’” and treats his own slaves in kind, his preferred nighttime activity with his wife, Fortunata, seems to involve keeping each other awake with their bodily functions.³⁷ Overall, one discovers very little actual sex in the *Cena*, despite the prominence of ‘food porn’ and the erotics of death.³⁸

The Great Gatsby invites a similar contrast between Mrs Wilson’s apartment and the scene that follows in West Egg.³⁹ I agree that these episodes can be read productively as a ‘doublet’ of Trimalchio’s *Cena*, but it would be a mistake to ignore the fact that the *Satyricon* already contains the framework of two parties that work against one another.⁴⁰ Just as in the ancient novel, the first of the pair is highly sexed, while the second explores different themes, such as wealth and status. Cooped up in an over-furnished apartment with a name that ties her to Venus, Myrtle establishes a physical presence that becomes almost oppressive.⁴¹ ‘In that

³⁵ Buchanans’ estate: Fitzgerald 1925, 6–20; Myrtle’s apartment: 28–38; Gatsby’s mansion: 39–55.

³⁶ Sullivan (1968, 234) comments on ‘the very physical nature of women’s sexual appetites, at least as presented in the *Satyricon*... The women in the story are interested simply in the physical act’.

³⁷ Petronius 1922, 105, 164, and 166. For a different reading of Trimalchio’s involvement in pederasty vis-à-vis Gatsby, see Endres 2009, 70.

³⁸ Cf. Courtney 2001, 223. Trimalchio serves erotic food items at Petr. 35,3 (testicles, womb of a sterile sow) and 60,4–6 (Priapic pastry). On the slippage between food and sex in the *Satyricon* more generally, see Conte 1996, 104–139; cf. Rimell 2004, esp. 12, 99–100, and 124–139.

³⁹ Sklenar 2007–2008, 121–123; see Way 1986 on the string of social occasions in *Gatsby*, esp. 58–59 for Petronius’s influence.

⁴⁰ Cf. Sklenar 2007–2008.

⁴¹ On the significance of Myrtle’s name, among others, see Meyers 2013.

strictly tangible world she dominates by the magnificence of her body and the intensity of her desire, Myrtle can accomplish no more than a physical expansion'.⁴² With the female body as its primary axis, the scene at the Manhattan flat allows raw sexuality to be performed in the flesh.

Gatsby's party in Chapter 3 seems almost ethereal by comparison.⁴³ Even the dancing at West Egg is innocent and childlike, as 'girls were putting their heads on men's shoulders in a puppyish, convivial way' and 'swooning backward playfully into men's arms'.⁴⁴ Jordan Baker's sophomoric escort delivers the only overtly sexual lines in this episode, with his 'violent innuendo' and 'obstetrical conversation with two chorus girls'.⁴⁵ In the previous chapter, when Tom and his mistress disappeared into the bedroom, their intentions were obvious even to our narrator.⁴⁶ But now, in this new environment, Nick watches Gatsby and Jordan emerge from a private meeting in a library (of all places) without the slightest glimmer of romantic tension.⁴⁷ By contrast with this scene, the depiction of Myrtle Wilson gathers force and precision as an embodiment of unmitigated lust.

The Petronian brothel and Myrtle Wilson's flat also share spatial features, in that both are compact, urban, transient dwellings, separate from the mansions which Trimalchio and Gatsby inhabit. A soporific mood pervades the brothel, to the point that Quartilla demands, "How dare you think of going to sleep when you know that the vigil of Priapus is to be kept?"⁴⁸ *The Great Gatsby* activates a similar motif, for instance when Tom yawns and orders Myrtle to send for more ice and mineral water "before everybody goes to sleep."⁴⁹ Whereas Encolpius drinks an entire bottle of aphrodisiac, Nick gets drunk for the second time in his life 'so that everything that happened has a dim, hazy cast over it'.⁵⁰ The palpable eroticism that distinguishes each gathering must battle against drunkenness, boredom, and exhaustion to maintain its hold on the narrator.

⁴² Coleman 2004, 108.

⁴³ Coleman 2004, 110–112.

⁴⁴ Fitzgerald 1925, 50.

⁴⁵ Fitzgerald 1925, 44 and 50–51.

⁴⁶ Fitzgerald 1925, 29–30. Incidentally, Fitzgerald expressed to Perkins his concern that this moment was too 'noticeably raw' to escape censorship; see Fitzgerald and Perkins 1971, 85, 91, and 93.

⁴⁷ Fitzgerald 1925, 52.

⁴⁸ Petronius 1922, 52.

⁴⁹ Fitzgerald 1925, 32; cf. the napping Mr. McKee at p. 36, to which character I return shortly.

⁵⁰ Petronius 1922, 50; Fitzgerald 1925, 29.

Peals of feminine laughter provide a soundtrack for these smaller parties, in contrast to the musical scores that accompany Trimalchio and Gatsby, his Jazz Age successor.⁵¹ Encolpius responds with confusion when ‘the whole place was filled with mocking laughter [by Quartilla and her maids], and we, who could see no reason for such a change of front, stared blankly at each other and then at the women’.⁵² This opacity repeats itself in Myrtle’s impact on Nick, who describes how ‘her laughter, her gestures, her assertions became more violently affected moment by moment’.⁵³ He later recalls that ‘she looked at me and laughed pointlessly’ and that ‘the room rang full of her artificial laughter’.⁵⁴ Neither Nick nor Encolpius has been endowed with the ability to comprehend the mirthful noises that issue from these erotically dominant women.

Fitzgerald’s complicated treatment of female sexuality in *The Great Gatsby* and throughout his fiction provides a broader context for reading Myrtle Wilson.⁵⁵ While often credited with having given voice to the flapper, the newly liberated, culturally empowered woman of the 1920s, Fitzgerald viewed this shift in American mores through his own ‘male perspective of puzzled ambivalence’ and harbored a persistent fear that ‘the flapper embodied not freedom but moral anarchy and lack of direction’.⁵⁶ As one literary point of reference, Quartilla highlights these types of ideological tension as they become manifest in the Manhattan apartment.⁵⁷

Both women embody female desire in ways that rely on physiological language. Quartilla’s eroticism finds expression in the ‘tertian ague’ that she has contracted thanks to Priapus, and she uses her fever as a pretense for luring the young men to an orgy:⁵⁸

⁵¹ The importance of music to Trimalchio and Gatsby is noted by MacKendrick (1950, 308). Rimell (2013, 71–77) is interested in how sound in general ties the *Satyricon* together.

⁵² Petronius 1922, 48.

⁵³ Fitzgerald 1925, 30–31.

⁵⁴ Fitzgerald 1925, 32 and 36.

⁵⁵ For an overview of women in Fitzgerald’s fiction, see Sanderson 2001.

⁵⁶ Sanderson 2001, 143 and 147.

⁵⁷ Cf. Sklenar’s (2007–2008, 124) suggestion that Myrtle plays Fortunata to Tom Buchanan’s Trimalchio.

⁵⁸ Petronius 1922, 45. Quartilla’s fever reappears as a point of concern throughout the fragments that survive from this episode; see Petronius 1922, 45–47 and 49; Courtney 2001, 67.

‘That very night, I tossed so violently in the throes of a dangerous chill that I was afraid I had contracted a tertian ague, and in my dreams I prayed for a medicine. I was ordered to seek you out, and to arrest the progress of the disease by means of an expedient to be suggested by your wonderful penetration!’

Firebaugh has outdone himself, translating *monstrata subtilitas* as ‘wonderful penetration!’ to foreshadow the events that are about to unfold. Of course, the medicine prescribed for Quartilla’s ‘disease’ turns out to be copious sex – a solution which may surprise Encolpius but will not have eluded those of us with even moderately good penetration.

The *Satyricon*’s portrayal of the female libido as a recurring fever enhances the hysterical qualities of Myrtle Wilson. When Nick first encounters Myrtle, he notices ‘an immediately perceptible vitality about her as if the nerves of her body were continually smoldering’.⁵⁹ Read against Quartilla’s tertian ague, such a pointed description of Myrtle’s smoldering nerves borders on diagnosis. Fittingly, Tom characterizes his affair with Myrtle as a kind of therapy: “‘It does her good to get away,’” he says to Nick, as if prescribing a cure.⁶⁰ After Myrtle emerges from the bedroom with Tom, Nick observes that her ‘intense vitality’ has changed to ‘impressive hauteur,’ a move which signals the temporary relief that extramarital sex has provided.⁶¹ These details bring Myrtle and Quartilla into alignment, as both perform a version of female desire that draws on the pseudo-medical discourse of their respective societies.⁶²

As a gendered construction of erotic love, Myrtle exerts a strong influence over the development of Nick’s character, just as she does for her husband.⁶³ Unlike the androgynous Jordan Baker, Myrtle forces Nick’s sexuality into a corner.⁶⁴ He comes upstairs reluctantly and at every attempt to leave becomes ‘entangled in some wild, strident argument which pulled me back, as if with ropes, into my chair’.⁶⁵ Equally helpless to escape Quartilla’s orgy, Encolpius laments that ‘the maid took two ribbons from her bosom and bound our feet with one and our hands

⁵⁹ Fitzgerald 1925, 25.

⁶⁰ Fitzgerald 1925, 26.

⁶¹ Fitzgerald 1925, 30.

⁶² On the American treatment of hysteria, widely portrayed as a disease of the nerves, see Scull (2009, 84–103). The use of sexual stimulation as a remedy is discussed in depth by Maines (1999).

⁶³ See Fraser (1984, 146–48) on the fraught masculinity of Mr Wilson, who regains his agency only after the death of his wife.

⁶⁴ Baker’s androgyny is noted by Fraser (1984, 149–150).

⁶⁵ Fitzgerald 1925, 35.

with the other'.⁶⁶ Although Encolpius came willingly under a ruse, Quartilla claimed to have “a troop in readiness for the morrow” should he have refused her request.⁶⁷ The compulsion under which Nick and Encolpius enter the presence of female desire marks the liminal status of each narrator’s erotic potential.

Previous criticism has referred to Encolpius’s sexual adventures with both men and women in the process of drawing similar conclusions for Nick, whose homoerotic attractions are a subtext throughout the work.⁶⁸ ‘If *The Great Gatsby* is a love story, and it is, it is one aware of this complex sexuality of antiquity’.⁶⁹ Nick’s ambivalence surfaces most noticeably in Chapter 2 when he leaves Myrtle’s flat with Mr McKee, a man ‘in the “artistic game”’ who ‘photographed [his wife] a hundred and twenty-seven times since they had been married’.⁷⁰ Marginalized by the eroticism of Myrtle Wilson, Nick responds to McKee in a way that highlights his own bisexuality and aligns him more closely with Encolpius.⁷¹

Consider the complementary descriptions of Myrtle’s sister Catherine and the effeminate Mr McKee.⁷² Nick views Catherine as a ‘worldly girl’ with a ‘sticky bob’ and a ‘complexion powdered milky white,’ upon which a garish set of eyebrows has been painted. As a result, ‘the efforts of nature toward restoration of the old alignment gave a blurred air to her face’. Nick’s notes on Mr McKee point out similar cosmetic details:

Mr. McKee was a pale, feminine man from the flat below. He had just shaved, for there was a white spot of lather on his cheekbone, and he was most respectful in his greeting to every one in the room.

⁶⁶ Petronius 1922, 50.

⁶⁷ Petronius 1922, 47.

⁶⁸ Fraser 1984; see also Wasiolek 1992. The evidence for Nick’s ambivalent sexuality includes his encounter with Mr McKee (discussed here); masculinizing descriptions of his main love interest, Jordan Baker (e.g., Fitzgerald 1925, 11 and 58); his idealization of Gatsby (see Wasiolek 1992, 18); and an earlier version of the manuscript in which Nick’s brief affair with a girl from Jersey City ended when “her brother began favoring me with...” (see Fraser 1984, 142).

⁶⁹ Fraser 1984, 140.

⁷⁰ Fitzgerald 1925, 30.

⁷¹ For historical background, see Chauncey (1994, esp. 99–127 and 273–280) on the suppression of male homosexuality among the middle class and on the ‘double lives’ of many gay men.

⁷² Fitzgerald 1925, 30.

Later that evening, while McKee naps in a chair, Nick describes how ‘I wiped from his cheek the remains of the spot of dried lather that had worried me all afternoon’.⁷³ The two men exit the party together, at which point Nick finds himself in McKee’s bedroom in a hazily remembered vignette that bears unstated, yet accessible implications.⁷⁴ To a certain degree, the staged femininity that Myrtle’s sister possesses has been subtly transferred by Nick to McKee.

McKee’s most obvious counterparts in the *Satyricon* are two catamites summoned up by Quartilla.⁷⁵ The first, ‘clad in a myrtle-colored frieze robe, and girded round with a belt,’ molests Encolpius and his friends until Quartilla shoos him away.⁷⁶ The second catamite works even harder to elicit a response from Petronius’s woefully impotent narrator:⁷⁷

He manipulated my member for a long time, but all in vain. Gummy streams poured down his sweating forehead, and there was so much chalk in the wrinkles of his cheeks that you might have mistaken his face for a roofless wall, from which the plaster was crumbling in a rain.

The catamite’s application of white chalk to his face symbolizes his passive, female role in the erotic power grid, as well as the unnaturalness of his enthusiasm to occupy this position as an adult.⁷⁸ Petronius brings out this latter meaning by likening the catamite’s aging face to a wall from which a rainstorm is removing the plaster. In other words, nature threatens to uncover what lies beneath the pathic’s made-up façade.

On one reading, Catherine and Mr McKee split this Petronian figure. The ‘efforts of nature’ on Catherine’s face expose the unreality of her persona and, to a certain extent, correspond to the effects of Petronius’s metaphor of rain on a wall. Likewise, the *Satyricon* prompts one to think carefully about the diminishing spot of white lather on McKee’s cheekbone, a suggestive infelicity that presents such a ‘worry’ to Nick that he takes it upon himself to correct it. On the one hand, Nick

⁷³ Fitzgerald 1925, 36.

⁷⁴ Fitzgerald 1925, 37–38. McKee asks Nick to lunch and is told to “‘Keep your hands off the lever’” by the elevator boy. After a sudden ellipsis, Nick recalls standing next to McKee’s bed ‘and he was sitting between the sheets, clad in his underwear, with a great portfolio in his hands’. See Fraser 1984, 143–144.

⁷⁵ It is also possible that one catamite appears twice, as suggested by Sullivan (1968, 52).

⁷⁶ Petronius 1922, 51. This was one of the underlined passages in Fitzgerald’s Loeb (see above).

⁷⁷ Petronius 1922, 55.

⁷⁸ On the Roman catamite/*cinaedus/pathicus*, the adult male who desires to be penetrated, see Parker (1997, esp. 53–54 and 56–58) and Williams (2010, 191–239).

may simply be attempting fastidiously to control his surroundings or to save another man from embarrassment. Yet his discomfort with McKee's personal hygiene may also stand in for a deeper anxiety about the perceived abnormality of his own homoerotic desires.

Nick's erotic ambivalence mirrors his position as the narrator of a story in which he participates, as both inside and outside the events he describes.⁷⁹ Whereas Myrtle and Tom enact a hetero-normative paradigm, and Gatsby and Daisy a dramatic illusion, Nick courts the boyish Jordan Baker and only partially suppresses his attraction to men.⁸⁰ Myrtle's eroticism further alienates Nick as he ponders, in one of his most famous moments, the duality of his point of view:⁸¹

Yet high over the city our line of yellow windows must have contributed their share of human secrecy to the casual watcher in the darkening streets, and I was him too, looking up and wondering. I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life.

Located in the midst of the action – just before Myrtle's 'warm breath poured over me the story of her first meeting with Tom' – this passage articulates Nick's relationship to the narrative against the background of his sexuality.⁸²

The manipulation of Encolpius's voice at the brothel resembles that of Nick's in this scene.⁸³ During a lull in the orgy, Encolpius observes that Ascyrtos has nodded off, only to have his face smeared with lampblack by a maid whom he had insulted.⁸⁴ A gap then opens between Encolpius the narrator and Encolpius the dramatic agent:⁸⁵

⁷⁹ Fraser (1984) makes this point well, though he does not explore its connection to the Quarta episode. See also Endres 2009, 74.

⁸⁰ On the theatricality of Gatsby and Daisy, see Endres 2009, 68–69.

⁸¹ Fitzgerald 1925, 35.

⁸² Fitzgerald 1925, 36. On the urban context for and policing of homosexual subcultures in early twentieth-century New York City, see Chauncey 1994, esp. 131–149.

⁸³ This observation contributes to more general comments about Nick/Encolpius by Fraser (1984), Endres (2009, 74), and Fusillo (2008, 330–331).

⁸⁴ Petronius 1922, 52.

⁸⁵ Petronius 1922, 53. On the lapse of narrative cohesion, see Schmeling 2011, 66. Firebaugh's treatment of the Latin pluperfect tense as an imperfect, e.g., 'was enjoying', heightens the impact. Cf. Heseltine's translation (1913, 31): 'By this time I was tired out with adventures too, and had just taken the tiniest taste of sleep. All the servants, indoors and out, had done the same. Some lay anyhow by the feet of the guests, some leaned against the walls, some even stayed in the doorway with their heads together. The oil in the lamps had run out, and they gave a thin and dying light'.

Completely exhausted by so many untoward adventures, I, too, was enjoying the shortest of naps, the whole household, within and without, was doing the same, some were lying here and there asleep at our feet, others leaned against the walls, and some even slept head to head upon the threshold itself; the lamps, failing because of a lack of oil, shed a feeble and flickering light...

While Encolpius claims to be ‘completely exhausted’ by his escapades, Nick finds himself caught in the push and pull of ‘the inexhaustible variety of life’.⁸⁶ At precisely this moment, each narrator disentangles himself from the story to become an objective observer. Light imagery heightens the correspondence by bringing together Fitzgerald’s ‘yellow windows’ and ‘darkening streets’ with Petronius’s ‘feeble and flickering light’.

In the *Satyricon*, the division of the narrator’s point of view is less marked than it is for Nick, who mulls over his identity with the casual watcher below. Encolpius simply states that he began dozing along with the rest of the household; then, adopting a different perspective, he describes the scene from a distance. In other words, while Encolpius the character drowns, Encolpius the narrator proceeds with the business of storytelling. Although Fitzgerald would have had many precedents for the participatory narrator, this shift represents one of Petronius’s main techniques as a writer of satire.⁸⁷ More importantly, set within the wider frame of a comparison between Quartilla’s brothel and Myrtle’s apartment, both passages capitalize on the alienating effects of female sexuality to push Nick and Encolpius to the margins of their own stories.

Petronius’s exposition of Neronian decadence gained traction in literature of the 1920s that grappled with the implications of booming markets and rapidly transforming social values. In 1922, Firebaugh’s unexpurgated translation provoked a lawsuit that had the unintended consequence of launching the *Satyricon* into the limelight.⁸⁸ The judge who decided in favor of Firebaugh called the ancient novel a ‘keen satire on the vulgarity of mere wealth’ by an author whom ‘the worship of the flesh and its lusts alternately disgusted and fascinated’.⁸⁹ Published in the same year, T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* famously opens with a quotation from the *Cena* in which the decrepit Sybil wishes for death.⁹⁰ And James Joyce’s *Ulysses* – which reworks Homer in ways that strongly evoke the *Satyricon* – adds the

⁸⁶ For another possible source of this phrase in Fitzgerald, see Endres 2009, 75.

⁸⁷ Beck 1973 and 1982; cf. Conte 1996, 1–36.

⁸⁸ Briggs 1999, 229.

⁸⁹ *New York Times*, September 28, 1922, p. 11; cited by Briggs 1999, 228.

⁹⁰ Petr. 48,8.

story of the Ephesian matron to a dizzying array of literary allusions.⁹¹ In this context, Petronius's capacity to authorize a critique of twentieth-century sexual mores could hardly have been lost on Fitzgerald.

Graphic scenes like the orgy at Quartilla's brothel more accurately characterize Petronius's treatment of 'the flesh and its lusts' than does Trimalchio's banquet, which concentrates instead on the failure of economic success to unlock the gates of nobility. Although *The Great Gatsby* lacks any explicit references to Quartilla and her entourage, the brothel episode that precedes the *Cena* helps to clarify the drunken gathering at Myrtle's apartment. Some of the themes that Quartilla throws into relief have been noted independently by critics of *The Great Gatsby*, particularly by those who accept 'sexual transgression as *the* open secret of the novel'.⁹² Nevertheless, reading Quartilla and Myrtle against one another sharpens the significance of these motifs and expands the range of potential echoes that may be identified between these two works.

Myrtle Wilson is a woman of substance, a 'thickish figure' who 'carried her surplus flesh sensuously as some women can'.⁹³ Marginalized by this embodiment of feminine desire and by Tom's violent, heterosexual indulgence, Nick follows the lead of his own complex masculinity down the elevator to McKee's bedroom. Nick's ambivalent sexuality reflects his character's relationship to the narrative by situating him both 'within and without'. He doubles as a participant and an observer in the erotic world that Myrtle inhabits, as well as in the story he tells. Examining how Quartilla's brothel informs this process traverses the boundaries of Trimalchio's banquet to amplify the importance of *The Great Gatsby's* engagement with the entirety of the *Satyricon*, including its 'racier sections'.

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⁹¹ Harrison in Sandy and Harrison 2008, 317.

⁹² Froehlich 2010, 82.

⁹³ Fitzgerald 1925, 25.

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