

---

PETRONIUS

---

SATYRICON

Translated,  
with Notes and Topical Commentaries, by  
Sarah Ruden

Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.  
Indianapolis/Cambridge

Copyright © 2000 by Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

06 05 04 03 02 01 00 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

For further information, please address:

Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.  
PO Box 44937  
Indianapolis, IN 46244-0937

www.hackettpublishing.com

Cover design by Brian Rak and John Pershing.  
Interior design by Abigail Coyle.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Petronius Arbiter.  
[Satyricon. English]  
Satyricon / Petronius ; translated, with notes and topical commentaries  
by Sarah Ruden.  
p. cm.  
Includes bibliographical references.  
ISBN 0-87220-511-8 (alk. paper). — ISBN 0-87220-510-X (pbk. : alk.  
paper)  
1. Satire, Latin—Translations into English. 2. Rome—Fiction. I.  
Ruden, Sarah. II. Title.  
PA6558.E5 R83 2000 99-055844  
873'.01—dc21



The paper used in this publication  
meets the minimum requirements of  
the American National Standard for Information Sciences—  
Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials,  
ANSI Z39.48-1984.

## Contents

Preface	vii
Map: The World of the <i>Satyricon</i>	x
<i>Satyricon</i>	1
Part 1: Introducing Encolpius, Ascyltos, and Giton	1
Part 2: Quartilla's Orgy	11
Part 3: Trimalchio's Dinner Party	18
Part 4: Eumolpus	61
Part 5: The Ship of Lichas	79
Part 6: Croton	94
Commentaries	129
1: Who Was Petronius Anyway?	129
2: What Happened to the Text of the <i>Satyricon</i> ?	133
3: Roman Oratory	139
4: Ancient Views on Sexuality	144
5: The Roman Household	150
6: Roman Dinner Parties	163
7: Roman Religion	168
8: Some Literary Influences on the <i>Satyricon</i>	173
9: Poetry, Prose, and the <i>Satyricon</i>	180
10: Roman Philosophy in the <i>Satyricon</i>	185
Selected Bibliography	191

## COMMENTARIES

### *Commentary 1*

### *Who Was Petronius Anyway?*

Petronius is the name on the manuscripts of the *Satyricon*. Some manuscripts say "Petronius Arbiter," meaning "Petronius the Judge." Roman authors did not use titles or nicknames, so the "Judge" part must come from some early scholar connecting this Petronius to the one the historian Tacitus (*Annals*, Book 16, Chapter 18) describes as Nero's "judge of taste." This may have meant the man in charge of the lavish entertainments going on at the imperial court. Here is Tacitus' summary of Petronius' career:

Some brief background on Petronius is needed here. He spent his days in sleep and his nights in life's duties and diversions. Others rise to fame by their efforts; he rose by his laziness. Yet his reputation was not one of a glutton or spendthrift devouring his property in the usual way. His was an *educated* luxury. His words and actions, negligent and unselfconscious as he made them seem, had a convincing air of pleasant innocence about them. Yet when he went to Bithynia [part of modern-day Turkey] as governor, and afterwards became consul, he showed himself an energetic man, fully equal to his responsibilities. Afterwards he returned to his vices, or to the pretense of vices, and was taken into Nero's small circle of intimates as the judge of taste. Nero thought nothing elegant or exquisitely sensual unless Petronius had approved it.

Tacitus goes on to tell how Petronius incurred the jealousy of another henchman, who accused him of treason. Given a chance to commit suicide rather than be executed, Petronius committed probably the most elegant and witty suicide ever (discussed in Commentary 10).

This historical person is in fact the most likely author of the novel. The language, the physical details, and a few references to the popular

culture of the time are strong evidence that the *Satyricon* was written during the 60s C.E. Most of the extant narrative takes places somewhere near the Bay of Naples, a pleasure resort well known to Roman aristocrats during this period (although not exclusively then). Much of the *Satyricon*'s Latin is unusual, and some of the words are found nowhere else, but everything that is familiar at all connects the work to other works written during or before Petronius' lifetime. The same goes for food, clothing, household furnishings, and other objects mentioned in the story: they are often bizarre, but they fit no time better than Nero's reign.

Also powerful as evidence is the personality expressed by the authorial voice. Tacitus says Petronius was no crude lover of pleasure, but instead astute and refined. The offhand manner reported brings to mind the ironic tone of the novel. Readers should be aware of the axe Tacitus has to grind: his histories are full of old-fashioned Romans (Petronius is a mainstream Roman name) wasting their talents as court buffoons instead of statesmen, and living secretly virtuous lives in order to survive in an environment of totalitarian decadence. Still, it is doubtful that Tacitus could have entirely fabricated so compelling a portrait: that of a deeply cultured but adaptable man, full of critical intelligence and an expert but detached interest in what people did for fun—the kind of person who must have written the *Satyricon*.

The book would even fit nicely into some literary traditions of the Roman imperial court, as far as we know of them. Other courtiers wrote light literature to be performed and read out loud. The philosopher Seneca, shortly after Nero became emperor, dropped his usual stern style and wrote *The Pumpkinification of Claudius*, a spoof on accounts of the deification of recently dead emperors. The previous emperor Claudius had had much-mocked physical handicaps and a terrible relationship with his stepson Nero. In Seneca's cruel lampoon, Claudius' last words are "Alas, I have shat myself," and he is thrown out of heaven in a satire of epic mythology. The spoof may have been read or performed during the Saturnalia, the comic festival in December. The most telling feature in comparison to the *Satyricon*, besides the raw humor, is the format: prose combined with verse. (Short works set up like this—the *Pumpkinification*, for example—are called Menippean satire.)

The *Satyricon* is a far more ambitious work, much longer and more complex (to judge only from what we have left of it). But I have no trouble imagining how it could have fit into Nero's court. Nero was obsessed with art and culture, which are a main concern of the novel. He performed his own poems in public (at a time when public artistic perfor-

mance was not respectable for anyone above a freedman in status). His Golden House was a sort of dilettante's Disney World, full of over-the-top imitations of previous art and buildings, and perhaps incorporating some of his own architectural designs. His reported last words expressed dismay at the passing of a great artist—himself. He might have enjoyed the *Satyricon*'s irreverent treatment of other artists, real and fictional. If Petronius was getting in some sly jabs at Nero himself—comparing him to the tasteless millionaire Trimalchio, for example—the emperor was probably too dense to know. But would not an egomaniac like Nero have been jealous of Petronius' literary achievement?

Unfortunately, we possess no good evidence of how the novel was first presented and to whom. I am on much firmer ground in calling it a plausible part of the Neronian literary world in general. The surviving text, skimpy as it is, reveals that many authors influenced it (see Commentaries 8, 9, and 10); but two really stand out, the one for the viciousness with which he is lampooned, the other simply for the space occupied by a critical rewrite of him. These are the philosopher Seneca the Younger and the epic poet Lucan. Several prose passages of Petronius, including the most outrageous piece of black humor (§141), are based on Seneca. The novel's longest poetic passage (§119–124) transforms parts of Lucan's *Civil War*, or *Pharsalia*. These two authors were in fact the most prominent of their generation. Yet, relative to other important Roman authors, they dated rather quickly. Unlike, for example, the leading Augustan authors of a few decades before (Vergil, Horace, Livy, and others), whose reputations only grew more solid with time, the leading Neronians suffered later from changing fashions and the emergence of new writers. It is not likely that a reaction to Lucan and Seneca would have been a vital concern to anybody but a contemporary of theirs.

All of this evidence in favor of Petronius' authorship adds up to high probability, but not to certainty. Scholars, however, have more or less lost interest in the debate, because no other remotely viable candidate for the authorship has appeared. The real problem is in knowing so little about this Petronius. Ancient accounts of him do not fill up two pages. The *Satyricon* is entirely fiction, containing no personal remarks attributable to the author. He gives us no reason to believe that any part of the story is based on his experience. All we can do to learn more about him is to read the novel.

### For Further Reading

Elsner, J., and J. Masters, eds. *Reflections of Nero: Culture, History and Representation*. Chapel Hill, N.C., 1994.

Grant, M. *Nero*. London, 1970.

Morford, M. "Nero's Patronage and Participation in Literature and the Arts." In *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt [Rise and Fall of the Roman World]* II, vol. 32.3, 1985, pp. 2003–2031.

Rankin, H. *Petronius the Artist: Essays on the Satyricon and its Author*. The Hague, 1971.

Rose, K. *The Date and Author of the Satyricon*. Leiden, 1971.

Scullard, H. *From the Gracchi to Nero* (5th ed.). London, 1982.

Seneca. *Apocolocyntosis [Pumpkinification]*. Edited by P. Eden. Cambridge, 1984.

Suetonius. *The Lives of the Caesars*.

Tacitus. *Annals*.

### Commentary 2

## What Happened to the Text of the Satyricon?

The remains of the *Satyricon* are tantalizing and pathetic. According to apparently informed sources, there were at least sixteen "books," or substantially long chapters. But all that has been handed down are excerpts allegedly from two or three of the later books. This sketchy map of the original gains credibility from the content of the remains. The story at this point is quite involved, suggesting that Encolpius and his friends have been in a lot of trouble over a long period of time in several places. Previous episodes mentioned (the loss of the tunic with the treasure sewn in, the offense against Priapus, the affairs with Lichas and Tryphaena, the various crimes and public humiliations recalled with a word or two) would need a lengthy tale in which to be played out. The continuity as well as the amount of text is compromised. Instead of one continuous fragment or a few, there are many short fragments. The only substantially unbroken portion of the story is the so-called Dinner Party of Trimalchio. With its finely detailed and plausibly structured sequence of events, it helps confirm the impression that other episodes were cut to ribbons in defiance of their literary quality. They are missing beginnings, endings, or whole important scenes—sometimes all three. The wit and verve in the scraps leaves critics in mournful frustration.

But we are lucky to have any of the work at all. The author comes to us over a narrow and rickety bridge between antiquity and the Renaissance. Perhaps only one ninth-century C.E. manuscript, possibly itself incomplete, was the source of all subsequent copies. Even the title is not entirely secure, although "Satyricon" has won general acceptance.