

Foreword: Reading the *Satyrica* in the 21st Century

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I well remember the first time I read the *Satyrica*. I was an undergraduate, attending a seminar on the how Classical Latin developed into ‘Vulgar Latin’, the basis for the modern Romance languages. In my term paper there was a section on ‘vulgar’ expressions in Petronius, particularly in the freedmen’s speeches during the *cena Trimalchionis* (§§ 41.10–46.8). Though this first encounter with the *Satyrica* had an exclusively linguistic focus, it got me excited about the text as a whole: I found it more intriguing than any ancient text I had read until then. I got myself a Loeb edition and, skipping the introduction, devoured the narrative in one go. It was years later that I took note of the scholarly discussions surrounding Petronius’ work. For the time being, it was just a fun read – a curious sex and crime narrative that gave rise to amusing anecdotes.

While I am glad my excitement about the *Satyrica* has not worn off over the years, I now realise that the way I approached the text was rather unfortunate. For, what is worrisome about the book is that it can be read as a piece of entertainment by those who are generally interested in antiquity and/or literature but who – just as my undergraduate self – do not bother too much about the book’s context. You can read the *Satyrica* just for fun, as you might read, for instance, Miguel de Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* or Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*: Even with very limited knowledge about their socio-historical and literary background, these books make for a compelling read. What is more, they allow you to tick one more ‘classic’ off your bucket list. The downside of this approach is that, if you take the *Satyrica* to be a harmless piece of entertainment, you are very likely to be taken in by Petronius’ masterly storytelling. You absorb, and quite possibly reproduce, the strong cultural biases the book hinges on in so many ways.

Let us take the First Rivalry over Giton (§§ 9–11) as an example:¹ Encolpius, the protagonist of the *Satyricon*, finds his beloved Giton in tears. Reluctantly, the boy tells Encolpius that their companion Ascyltus had raped him (or, at least, attempted to do so). Encolpius confronts Ascyltus, starting an altercation full of sexual insults. Eventually, Ascyltus agrees to leave. Once they are alone, Encolpius seizes the chance to have sex with Giton. Suddenly, Ascyltus comes back. He surprises the other two in bed, mocks Encolpius and beats him with a leather strap. Then, the episode breaks off.

If a story like the First Rivalry over Giton was to be published today, it would likely (and hopefully) feature several trigger warnings: ‘This text contains depictions of sexual assault, sexual slurs, and physical abuse. Reader discretion is advised’. What is most problematic about the First Rivalry over Giton – as well as about many ancient comedies discussed in this study – is that it treats a case of (attempted) rape as a perfectly trivial matter. This effect is created through several ‘techniques’, some of which could easily be employed in narratives set in our own time: Firstly, Ascyltus (the rapist) never acknowledges he has done anything wrong. He treats the assault on Giton in a thoroughly light-hearted manner, even exploiting its potential for play-acting: “*si Lucretia es*” inquit “*Tarquinius invenisti*” (“If you are Lucretia,” he said, “you have found your Tarquinius!”), § 9.5). Secondly, Encolpius – Giton’s ‘spouse’ – does little better: Though he is upset about Giton’s distress (§ 9.3) and immediately confronts Ascyltus, his attempt at ‘avenging’ the rape is half-hearted at best. After all, he and Ascyltus soon end up laughing together (§ 10.3). Rather than comforting Giton when the rapist has finally left, the only thing on Encolpius’ mind is to have sex with the boy himself (§ 10.7). Thirdly, there is no sense of ‘divine justice’ to the episode: Rather than being punished, the rapist Ascyltus ends up ‘punishing’ Encolpius, the one who set out to help Giton (§ 11.4). Fourthly, all of this is part of a sustained parody of the rape of Lucretia according to Livy’s *ab urbe condita* (1.57.4–59) and Ovid’s *Fasti* (2.685–852). The parodic contrast between the respective characters (Giton ~ Lucretia, Ascyltus ~ Tarquinius, Encolpius ~ Collatinus²) has the boy’s suffering appear all the more insignificant. Fifthly, Petronius’ narrator makes sure to bring to the fore the

1 For the text, my translation and a full discussion, cf. chapter III. First Rivalry over Giton: Encolpius versus Ascyltus (§§ 9–11).

2 As will become clear in chapter III.1.3. Sexual Rivalry between Two Tarquinius, there are also striking parallels between Encolpius and Tarquinius.

farcical aspects of the episode, having all else fade into the background. It is striking, for instance, that Giton's point of view is missing from most of the episode.

Among other things, the First Rivalry over Giton implies that what is truly interesting about cases of sexual violence is not the victim's suffering but the (male) guardian's attempt to 'make it right'; that you can prove to be a 'true man' by always standing your ground – regardless of whether this means to avenge an attack on your 'spouse' (*Encolpius*) or to follow through with the attack itself (*Ascyltus*). At the same time, though on a different level, the episode normalises the idea that rape is compatible with humour. Speaking in 21st-century terms, Petronius' text entrenches in readers' minds some basic tenets of toxic masculinity. This, I suggest, is the danger that lies in taking the *Satyrice* as a straightforward piece of entertainment.

Does this mean, however, that we should stop reading the *Satyrice* altogether? Should we accept that it is toxic beyond repair and that modern readers are better off ignorant of it? If I thought this to be the answer, I would surely not have written the study at hand. Rather, what we need to be – and what I failed to be when I first came into contact with Petronius – is *critical readers*: We need to constantly ask ourselves 'What is the basis for the claims made in the book?' – be they made by characters, the narrator, or indeed by the overall design of the story. Crucially, we need to acknowledge that any reading of the *Satyrice* is highly culture-dependent. On the one hand, we cannot help but project some of our own (modern) assumptions onto the text. If this bias is not kept in check, we end up with anachronistic readings of Petronius' work.³ On the other hand, this study will show that the *Satyrice* cannot be properly understood without thorough knowledge of its cultural and historical background.

Again, we may look at the First Rivalry over Giton for exemplification. For, at close inspection, Petronius' trivialisation of sexual violence goes further than the modern eye will readily observe. Apart from matters of play-acting, parody and farce (cf. above), the episode is heavily dependent on matters of social status: One of Petronius' most effective techniques for playing down the seriousness of rape is that he casts Giton in the role of the rape victim; Giton, a slave(-like) character at the bottom of the social hierarchy. In the cruel logic of social status, such a character cannot give rise to a complex plot about regaining/avenging one's

3 For anachronistic perceptions of the same-sex element in the *Satyrice*, cf. note 337.

‘sexual purity’ (*pudicitia*) – the simple reason being that a slave(-like) character had no *pudicitia* to lose in the first place. There were no serious social and legal consequences to the rape of such a person. Arguably, this is the main reason why Giton’s perspective – same as Casina’s in Plautus’ eponymous play – is assumed to be close to meaningless by the characters around him (and presumably by many contemporary readers/listeners). The only ones who can make significant gains or losses in the affair are those in a position to exploit the victim: In the zero-sum game of sexual rivalry, one rival will eventually outperform the other. One rival loses, the other one wins. In this type of plot, the character we identify as the victim is not (required to be) a *subject* with own emotions and a distinct perspective. Rather, this character is (required to be) no more than the *object* of the rivals’ desire.

In many shapes and forms, slavery remains a reality to this day. Still, for modern readers who are not confronted with such matters on a daily basis, the dynamics of social status are difficult to comprehend. Liberal societies distinguish between licit and illicit sexual intercourse on the basis of the partners’ consent: We speak of rape if one partner forces themselves on the other. In Graeco-Roman antiquity, however, the legitimacy of sexual relationships mainly depended on the gender and the status of the persons involved: A citizen woman had to marry and have sex with the man chosen for her by her father or male guardian, virtually regardless of her wishes. A citizen man – no matter whether married or unmarried – was free to have sex with his own slaves as well as with prostitutes. A married woman, on the other hand, must not have sex with anyone other than her husband. For, in the eyes of (the male members of) her family, safeguarding the legitimacy of her children had the highest priority. Slaves had no say in this whatsoever; if anyone’s consent was required, it was that of their owners. In short: The assessment as to whether sexual intercourse was deemed (il)licit depended on social norms, which can only be understood in the context of patriarchy and slavery.

Of course, these considerations are not new to Classical scholarship. In the past decades, various researchers have carefully analysed the interface between gender and social status in antiquity. The *Iphis* series, for instance, with its primary focus on gender studies in Classics, comprises no less than 17 publications.⁴ Among other things, its discussions

4 B. Feichtinger, T. Fuhrer, C. Walde & G. Wöhrle (eds.), *Iphis. Gender Studies in den Altertumswissenschaften (series)*. Trier.

of power relations and eroticism remain highly relevant to the questions touched upon above.⁵ In recent years, some scholars have delved deeper than was previously thought possible into the dynamics of ancient sex, gender and slavery. The contributions in Kamen & Marshall (eds. 2021) skilfully read ancient texts ‘against the grain’, showing that slaves were not exclusively passive sex objects but that they retained a (limited) sense of identity and even autonomy in sexual matters. Serafim et al. (eds. 2022) draw on textual as well as non-textual sources so as to shed a brighter light on the specific physical acts of sexual intercourse performed in antiquity, ranging from voyeurism to sexual fantasies and the use of sex toys. One of the publications that proved most valuable to the study at hand is Amy Richlin’s (2017) reassessment of Plautine comedy. Her investigation systematically accounts for the fact that Plautus’ plays do not only feature slave characters but that these – as well as all other *dramatis personae* – were also played by real-life slaves or by other persons low in the social hierarchy. She succeeds at interpreting the *fabulae palliatae* as reflections of the slave experience in the Roman Republic, cataloguing not only the abuse they had to suffer but, crucially, also the desires they expressed and the hopes they cherished. Just as the contributions in Kamen & Marshall (eds. 2021), Richlin’s work is a stark reminder that ancient slaves – despite their social marginalisation and exploitation – retained an identity of their own. As far as the intersection between gender and social status is concerned, it is worth highlighting Richlin’s (2017: 252–310) chapter on ‘Looking like a Slave-Woman’: What did it mean to ancient audiences (as well as to actors and playwrights) that the roles of women in the *fabula palliata* were exclusively performed by male actors? Quite possibly, this arrangement had the effect of playing down the suffering of female characters (such as rape victims), while – somewhat paradoxically – it emphasised the (sexual) vulnerability of young, enslaved males. They, after all, were the ones putting sexual victimisation before the eyes of the audience.

When I first conceived of the study at hand, I did not expect much of it would centre around questions of gender and social status. As I tried to make sense of Petronius’ comicality, however, I soon realised this could not be achieved without a thorough understanding of the sexual norms of Graeco-Roman society. One modest accomplishment of this study, perhaps, is that it draws attention to gender and power relations beyond

5 Cf. Feichtinger & Kreuz (eds. 2010).

the episodes where these are particularly salient, such as the *cena Trimalchionis* (§§ 26.7–78) or the events at Croton (§§ 124.2–141.11). The most astonishing figure in this regard is Giton, a character who covers nearly the full spectrum of what sex slaves or prostitutes experience in ancient comedy (and elsewhere). On the one hand, he is treated by other characters as they see fit, regardless of the boy’s feelings or wishes. Both Ascyltus and Encolpius regularly treat Giton as a piece of personal property and/or a sex object. Among other things, the boy suffers (an attempted) rape (§ 9.1–5), is ‘split up’ between two interested parties (§ 11.4, 79.12–80.1), performs servile tasks (e.g. § 9.2, 26.10, 91.1), and endures physical violence (§ 79.11, 96.3).⁶ On the other hand, Giton at times manages to use his (sex) appeal to his advantage, saving himself from harm (e.g. § 80.3–5, 98.7–9) or even establishing a sense of authority for himself over those who have fallen for him.⁷ When it comes to his complex character and function in the *Satyrica*, then, Giton’s case is no less intriguing than Encolpius’ (who is the main focus of the study at hand). Though scholars such as George (1966), Makowski (2012) and Clark (2019) have gone a long way, Giton deserves considerably more attention, including – but certainly not limited to – his possible indebtedness to comic *pueri delicati*.⁸

Though the field of gender studies in Classics holds impressive achievements, it can hardly be stressed enough that the considerations of this section are not purely academic. While we may wish to believe otherwise, we have not left patriarchy behind for good (yet); the progress we have made is fragile. It will be noted, for instance, that the ‘happy ending’ of many ancient comedies is brought about by the rapist’s decision to marry his victim.⁹ Peruvian law incentivised rapists to marry their victims until as recently as 1997! Similar laws were in place in many Central and South American countries.¹⁰ In Graeco-Roman antiquity, the gender and status of the persons involved determined whether their sexual relationship was legitimate or not. In the United Kingdom husbands were

6 Cf. my discussion of the relevant passages, esp. section III.1.2. Rape and Comic Slave Characters.

7 Cf. esp. section IV. Reconciliation: Encolpius and Giton (§ 91). As Panayotakis (2019b: 191–200) has shown, in the *Satyrica* a person’s (perceived) beauty can be enhanced by their (supposedly) low social status.

8 Cf. section III.1.2. Rape and Comic Slave Characters as well as section IV.2.4. Parallels in Other Comedies.

9 Cf. section III.1.1. Sexual Violence in Petronius and in the Comic Tradition.

10 Cf. Harris (2004: 50).

not punished for having non-consensual sex with their wives until 1991. In Germany, my home country, marital rape did not enter the legal code until 1997. The gender-related discussions we are having today include, for instance, questions of self-identification and about places transgender people should, perhaps, be banned from (e.g. women's bathrooms or women's prisons). The point about the *Satyrica* is not that this ancient text holds the answers to these modern questions. Rather, the text makes us aware – sometimes painfully aware – that none of the attitudes currently on the table are 'natural', let alone 'God-given'. They are based on social constructions, cultural-dependent perceptions of the world we live in – and this is rarely as obvious, perhaps, as when we deconstruct a text that strikes us as peculiarly alien and familiar at the same time. As we keep on reading the *Satyrica* in the 21st century, its greatest potential lies in teasing out the contradictions of our own time.