

VII

Final Remarks: The Sex Life of Petronius' Characters



My study did not set out to settle the question about the genre of the *Satyrica*. In fact, it may have added to the uncertainties about Petronius' place in Graeco-Roman literary history. For, even though I have identified a wide range of comic *topoi* in the *Satyrica*, my conclusion naturally cannot be that Petronius' work *is* a comedy. No matter how much the *Satyrica* may remind us of stage productions, it will always remain a written narrative. My suggestion here is of a different nature: As far as I can see, Petronian scholarship should not overstress the importance of assigning the *Satyrica* to a specific genre. After all, as we have observed, no scholar seriously believes the *Satyrica* to be a 'typical' representative of any genre (known or unknown). No matter what you assume to have been Petronius' 'starting point' – be it the novel, (Menippean) satire or Milesian tales – it seems clear that he developed his text into something that defies pre-defined categories.⁶⁸⁹

The potential of *Quellenforschung* – beyond what has long been common knowledge – is highly limited in the case of the *Satyrica*. We need to acknowledge that, by the time Petronius was writing, a large proportion of the elements he uses had become commonplaces of various literary forms, many of which are 'generic hybrids' themselves. This is why when we encounter a specific element in the *Satyrica* – for instance the theme of sexual rivalry – we cannot be sure whether Petronius is parodying a certain genre (e.g. the novel, historiography or tragedy) or whether he is drawing on a genre that did not treat the element seriously in the first place (e.g. satire or comedy). Unless we find clear verbal echoes of specific reference texts – as in the case of Livy's *ab urbe condita* in the

689 Cf. section I.4. The *Satyrica* and the Graeco-Roman Literary Tradition.

First Rivalry over Giton (§§ 9–11) – we are quite at a loss as to identifying Petronius' sources or inspirations.

This caveat should caution us against hastily assigning any given element in the *Satyrice* to a definite 'genre of origin'. When Johana Augier-Grimaud (2014: 111), for instance, asserts that the mockery of *pathici* must go back to (verse) satire, she forgets that satire itself had incorporated elements from various other genres and that, in fact, the derision of penetrated men had been a *topos* of comedy from Aristophanes onwards.⁶⁹⁰ Much of the same is the case when Natalie Breitenstein (ed. 2009 *ad* § 10.2) compares Encolpius to the parasites of satire and epigram: There is no mention of comedy, where the parasite had been a stock character much longer.⁶⁹¹ Again, my point is not that the *Satyrice* is more (likely) indebted to comedy than to other genres, but merely that in most cases we cannot make definite assertions.

One hypothesis that deserves particular attention is Richard Heinze's (1899) widely held view that the *Satyrice* amounts to a parody of the 'idealising' novel, i.e. the genre represented by the works of Chariton, Xenophon of Ephesus, Achilles Tatius, Longus, and Heliodorus.⁶⁹² The 'idealising' novel is said to star a man and a woman in love who are of a bourgeois background and who are faithful to each other throughout the narrative. According to Heinze, Petronius parodies this pattern by having the *Satyrice* star Encolpius and Giton, two low-life characters who are unfaithful to each other and who, significantly, are both males. A number of objections against Heinze's hypothesis have been raised by previous scholars in the course of the past decades: Firstly, it is unclear whether Petronius even knew any 'idealising' novels. Secondly, recent papyrus finds suggest that the novel is a much vaguer parodic target than Heinze assumed. Thirdly, even if accepted, Heinze's interpretation can only account for certain sections of the *Satyrice*; it cannot fruitfully be applied, for instance, to the *cena Trimalchionis* (§§ 26.7–78).

In this study I have objected, above all, against the last part of Heinze's hypothesis, i.e. that Petronius parodies the 'idealising' novel by substituting a male-female couple with a male-male one.⁶⁹³ Essentially, this view hinges on sexual norms that are modern rather than ancient:

690 Cf. section II.3. Other Male-Male Relationships in the Comic Tradition.

691 Cf. section III.2.2.2. Sex and Food.

692 Cf. section I.4.2.2. The *Satyrice* as a Parody.

693 Cf. section II. Overall Aspects: Sexuality in the *Satyrice*, the 'Idealising' Novel and the Comic Tradition.

Unlike many people of the past centuries and decades, ancient Romans were little concerned with whether males – who are at the centre of the *Satyrica* – were sexually interested in females or males. Desiring young and beautiful bodies was the norm, regardless of the person's sex. What mattered in the eyes of Roman society was that a 'true male' must always (appear to) play the insertive part in sexual intercourse. Allowing oneself to be penetrated was considered shameful, as it meant to approach the sexual status of women and slaves or other non-citizens. Male-male sex was only regarded as unproblematic if its dynamics reflected the social hierarchy (e.g. if a citizen male penetrated his own slaves or non-citizen prostitutes).

I have emphasised that in the *Satyrica*, the altercation between Encolpius and Ascyltus (§ 9.6–10.7) being a prime example, no male character is ever mocked or criticised for being interested in sex with other males. Rather, the insinuation is that they fail(ed) to perform the penetrative role (with whatever partner). Since, therefore, Petronius does not make fun of male-male sexual relationships *per se*, there is little basis for arguing they are integral to his parodic technique. The only way to uphold Heinze's hypothesis is to claim that Petronius' parody functions on a strictly literary level: He ridicules genre expectations rather than homoeroticism as such.

However, even this revised version of Heinze's interpretation is little convincing. The basic claim that Petronius turns heteronormative narratives on their heads is incorrect. It is not only that the extant 'idealising' novels themselves treat male-male sex without any apparent disapproval,⁶⁹⁴ equally importantly, the sexual interests of Petronius' characters are plainly not restricted to males. For instance, Encolpius' (desired) sex partners include not only men – Giton, likely Ascyltus (§ 9.10) and Philomela's son (§ 140.11) – but also several women: Hedyle (§ 106.2, 113.3), Tryphaena (§ 113.7–8), Chrysis (§ 126.8), Circe (esp. § 126.13–18), and Doris (§ 126.18). The same kind of indiscriminate desire is clearly attested for Eumolpus, Trimalchio, Habinnas, and even Giton. Rather than by a predilection for other males, Petronian men are characterised by an indiscriminate – and often excessive – sexual appetite.

My suggestion is that Petronius' depiction of male characters should be interpreted against the backdrop of indiscriminate sexual desire in the comic tradition. Apart from *senes amatores*, this trait is displayed, for instance, by Toxilus in Plautus' *Persa* and Pyrgopolinices in the *Miles*

694 Cf. n. 162 for references.

gloriosus (esp. 1104–13). In fact, I was able to show that all major constellations of male-male sexual relationships in the *Satyricon* have striking forerunners in ancient comedy, ranging from Aristophanes to Plautus and the *fabula Atellana*: master-slave relationships, Greek-style pederasty, ridicule of penetrated males, and teacher-student relationships. Still, I must advise caution: While it is tempting to speculate that the sex life of Petronius' characters was inspired by (farcical) comedies, I cannot prove this hypothesis beyond doubt. What can be stated with a high degree of confidence, however, is that Heinze's long-established interpretation can no longer be taken for granted. It must be re-evaluated and, quite possibly, laid to rest.