The Satyricon of Petronius

Genre, Wandering and Style
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CONTENTS

PREFACE

Cláudia Teixeira, Delfim F. Leão & Paulo Sérgio Ferreira

CONTRIBUTION TO THE DEFINITION OF THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE SATYRICON OF PETRONIUS AND MENIPPEAN SATIRE

Paulo Sérgio Ferreira

TWO CLOSED UNIVERSES IN THE SATYRICON OF PETRONIUS: THE CENA TRIMALCHIONIS AND THE CITY OF CROTON

Cláudia Teixeira

PETRONIUS AND THE MAKING OF CHARACTERS: GITON AND EUMOLPOS

Delfim F. Leão
Preface

The studies of Petronius presented in this book discuss three different perspectives that, despite being independent, aim at giving a general approach to the Satyricon. The first chapter explores the relation between the novel and Menippean satire: basing itself on the evolution, from Renaissance to modern times, of the various theories of Menippean genre and mode, it seeks to prove that, according to the theory of modern satire, the title of Varro’s Saturae Menippeae may be understood as an expression of genre, and also that Petronius tried to adapt some Menippean generic features to his own work.

The second chapter argues that the relationship of the anti-heroes of the Satyricon with the surrounding world is developed within a system of wandering, marked by constant escapes and immanent demands. However, this random and erratic movement does not prevent the anti-heroes from coming into contact with cohesive and intrinsically consistent systems. Among these systems are especially highlighted the Cena Trimalchionis and the city of Croton, an urban space that also configures a dystopia.

The last chapter focuses primarily on the characters of Giton and Eumolpos, who are two of the most curious Petronian inventions. The analysis of their behaviour and style provides us with a clarifying example of the care taken by Petronius in the construction of the main characters of the Satyricon and of the different levels of reading that he intentionally created, through the confluence in a single character of multiple lines deriving from literary and cultural tradition.
These studies are as well a way of thanking a very special person, someone who was a teacher and master of the book’s three authors: Professor Walter de Medeiros. Apart from being an enthusiastic reader of Petronius and a scholar with rare knowledge and sensibility, Professor Medeiros is also known for his kindness and rare personal qualities, all of which make of him a man who uniquely expresses academic *humanitas*.

May this volume pay humble and sincere homage to him.

*Cláudia Teixeira    Delfim F. Leão    Paulo Sérgio Ferreira*
To Justus Lipsius falls the merit of having been the first humanist and, in the opinion of Relihan and Branham, the first critic to give the expression *Satyra Menippea* a generic status, in a 1581 work subtitled: *Somnium. Lusus in nostri aeui criticos*.¹ Among the first and known defenders of the inclusion of the *Satyricon* in the genre of Menippean satire were Isaac Casaubon, *De Satyrica Graecorum Poesi et Romanorum Satirica* (1605), and John Dryden in “Discourse concerning the Original and Progress of Satire,” which prefaced his translation of Juvenal (1693).² These critics’ point of view collided with the many that sought to fit the Petronian work into a novelesque genre of Greek origin. This conflict allows us to say that the first attempts to explicitly configure the genre of Menippean satire occurred around the time of the polemic that surrounded

² Cf. Dryden (1926) 66: “Which is also manifest from antiquity, by those authors who are acknowledged to have written Var‐
ronian satires, in imitation of his; of whom the chief is Petronius Arbiter, whose satire, they say, is now printed in Holland, wholly recovered, and made complete: when ’tis made public, it will easily be seen by any one sentence, whether it be supposititious, or genuine.”
the first attempts to generically define the *Satyricon* of Petronius.

For the commentators of the 17th and 18th centuries, the satire in verse consisted in the praise of a particular virtue and the criticism of its complementary vice. For this reason, it is not at all strange that, in *Diui Claudii Apocolocyntosis*, by Seneca, or in the *Caesares*, by Julianus, what has most caught the attention of these critics has been the punishment of the emperors, even in the beyond, for crimes committed during life. Following Seneca and Julian, 18th century Menippean practice adapts, in Weinbrot’s words, “Roman formal verse satire’s insistence on overt norms, however limited they might be.”

Due to this, to a more than probable lack of knowledge of the works of Bion of Borysthenes and of Menippus of Gadara and to a quite limited knowledge of the *Saturae Menippeae* of Varro, it is not surprising that there is a preference among authors of the 17th and 18th centuries for the moderation and elegance of conservative aristocrats, like Varro and Seneca, who, in addition to having revealed a liking for philosophy, proposed solutions and positive rules, to the detriment of impudence, derision and an over-indulgent life stuffed with the vices of the Greek authors, Bion and

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4 Weinbrot (2005) 6 and 23-4: “Over several centuries and cultures some kinds of Menippean satire adapted a key structural and more device of Roman and later French and British formal verse satire. Those forms include the praise of virtue opposed to the vice attacked, while still preserving Menippean resistance to a dangerous false orthodoxy.”
Menippus. As to Petronius, a large part of the critics of the 18th century believed that the Satyricon criticized the vices of Nero and of his court, without praising the contrary virtues.

Among the modern theorists that have pondered Menippean satire, we can count Northrop Frye, who, in his Anatomy of Criticism, of 1957, distinguishes four types of fiction: novel, confession, anatomy and romance.\(^5\) Admitting the fact that the different forms of fiction are found to be mixed\(^6\), and defining the first two and the last types referred to, Frye proceeds to the configuration of the anatomy, commonly known as Menippean or Varronian satire. Considered to be a form in prose, it must have begun with the progressive inclusion, in texts in verse, of passages in prose, while the poetry itself became increasingly sporadic.\(^7\) Centered not so much on types, but rather on the attitudes of the characters, anatomy portrays abstract ideas and theories, and, in a stylized way, characters which are no more than “mouthpieces of the ideas they represent.”\(^8\) Though anatomy can deal with a great variety of subjects, some of the most recurring have to do with disturbances, mental obsessions and social vices such as philosophical pretension and pedantry. The anatomy expands intellectual fantasy, and the result consists in not only a structure whose violent dislocations alter the normal narrative

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\(^5\) Frye (1957) 303ss.
\(^6\) Frye (1957) 305.
\(^7\) Frye (1957) 309.
\(^8\) Frye (1957) 309.
position of Epicurus concerning the inhibiting power of shame and on the substitution, in Roman reality, of Epicurus’s vision for that of Cato the Censor, Scipio and Laelius – Connors glimpses, in the Petronian opposition between *Catones* and Epicurus, a parody of the Senecan passages.  

Connors’ position is relatively dubious, given that she does not clearly state that Petronius is an Epicurean and, consequently, identifies himself with his character that, in this moment, could be used up in the parodic inversion of the Senecan adaptation. The same thing cannot be said, however, with the positions of Conte, Slater and Panayotakis, who see a certain distance between Encolpius and Petronius.

Though he admits that the poem of 132.15 is a programmatic manifesto of realism, Conte stresses, following the others, among them Slater, that, in the mouth of one who had just revealed his impotence and frustrated Circe’s expectations, vv. 5-8 strike one as incongruent. The recollection of Epicurus’ doctrine on the argument for life is, for Conte, one more manifestation of the rhetorical culture of this mythomaniac character, under which, and with ironical distance, the author is hidden, a realist in his way of representing his anti-realist character. Though the manifesto on realism anticipates poetical principles that we will find in authors such as Juvenal 1.85s. and Martial 10.4.7-10,

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66 Slater (1990) 129.
the truth is that, in order to speak of his unfortunate experience and, finally, of his life, Encolpius still had recourse to such an abundant source of literature that, perfectly cut off from reality, he would be able to speak with his mentula, as though it were a person or, giving him the benefit of the doubt, like Ulysses reprimanding his heart. The use of the term opus, is justified, in Conte’s words, because “the whole affair takes place in a city created and composed out of literature. For Croton is a hyper-realistic city, in the sense that it is not just a corrupt city, but rather the corruption of a city. Better: Croton is the rhetorical topos of the “corrupt city,” as it was codified in moral and satirical writing – a rhetorical topos that has gone and turned itself into narrative reality. That is why Croton is a hyper-realistic city, because it is produced by the literary illusion of reality; it arises not directly from reality, but from an idea of realism. A realism of this sort, a realism of the second degree, like the kind that arises from the realistic literature of satire – how can this still be realism?”

Conte’s conclusions are given their full due for the obvious implications they hold for our more general reflection on the relationship between the Satyricon and Menippean satire, but to return to the Petronian passage under scrutiny, it would be well to keep in mind that, for Slater, it is not about the theory of literature, but rather a rhetorical and elegant theatrical exit from the ridiculous situation in which Encolpius finds himself,

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and a strategy to once again gain, even if temporarily, the sympathy of the reader.\textsuperscript{69}

By comparing the passage cited with the apostrophes that Eumolpos addresses, either to the \textit{fallax natura deorum}, that robs us of our hair (109.9), or to Jupiter himself (126.18), or by comparing it with the second verbal person with which Encolpius addresses the reader (\textit{quod uis, nummis praesentibus opta \textit{et} ueniet, 137.9; uultum seruatis, amici, 80.9}), Slater concludes that, in the passages where the narrative frame is lacking, Encolpius devotes himself to the creation of a reader for the poem and for his story, who, in turn, faced with the diversified nature of the voice that is addressing him, will feel free to vary his response. Slater also adds that, due to the necessities of characterization, Petronius plays with the elegy in the context of the tendency toward privatization that presides over the mixture of genres in the \textit{Satyricon}. In fact, simplicity, flexibility and intimacy make this genre propitious to the embodiment of Encolpius' poetic voice, while the epic and the drama, in their public character, better organize and interpret experience.\textsuperscript{70}

Panayotakis puts the words in 132.15 on the same level as those which Encolpius employs for his invective against Agamemnon in the initial chapters of the teaching of the art of declamation.\textsuperscript{71} This suggests that the theatrical interpretation that he proposes for both

\textsuperscript{69} \textsc{Slater} (1990) 165ss.  
\textsuperscript{70} \textsc{Slater} (1990) 165ss.  
\textsuperscript{71} \textsc{Panayotakis} (1995) 2.
passages will make it difficult to achieve identification between author and character. Though the comparison with the characters of tragedy and comedy, who speak directly to the spectators (for example, Mercurius in the Prologue of Plautus, *Amph.* 486-95) does not convince, since they could be simply mouth-pieces for the dramatist in his dialogue with the public (cf., for example, Mercurius in the Prologue of Plautus’ *Amphitryyo*, or Tiresias, or some of the words of the chorus in Seneca’s *Oedipus*). The same, however, does not hold for the hypothesis that the passage reflects the influence of mummery. If the possible staging of female nudity, of sexual relations on stage, of the lascivious gestures and vulgar, sexualized discourse characteristic of mummery are appropriate to Encolpius, they are not, on the contrary suitable to the refined Petronius, in whose novel the explicit character of the scene is inversely proportional to its level of “pornography”.72

The fragmented and lacunal state of the *Satyricon* doesn’t allow us to have a clear and objective notion of

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72 Panayotakis (1995) 175s. On 176, we read: «A plethora of sexual euphemisms, metaphors, irrelevant images, and a highly rhetorical tone create an impression of bookishness around the obscene act itself and present it in a grotesque mode which approaches the comically bizarre manner in which the mimic theatre must have presented sexual situations. A proper evaluation of the novel’s dense literary texture renders it anything else but pornography, but, on the other hand, it does not offer firm grounds for arguing that Epicurean theories are put forward as a design for living. The risible context of this apologia undermines any serious intentions one may have wished to apply to either the narrator or the author.»
The circumstances in which Encolpius remembers and relates what at sometime in the past happened to him. The interfering author is a relatively common practice in Greek and Latin literature (cf., for example, Virgil, A. 3.56-7 or 10.501-2). In spite of this, it seems to us that it is Encolpius who speaks vv. 132.15. Otherwise, we would be obliged to consider the verses corresponding to 80.9 and 137.9 as authorial interferences as well, or to consider Petronius as an adept of the popular version of the Epicurean philosophy. The authorial intrusions like those above, scarce and insignificant as they are, in the remaining part of the work, are not enough to characterize the author in a plausible fashion, or to lower him to the level of his character, that is, to identify him with Encolpius. Besides, this would destroy the irony that the reader presumes to be underlying the author’s creation.

A common denominator in the methodology to reconstruct the beginnings of Menippean satire has been the reliance upon the reception and consequent valuation of certain interpretations and specific bits of evidence, to the detriment of other readings and other testimonies. This would seem to be the correct procedure, because, as Koenraad Kuiper demonstrated, satire has nothing to do with form and function in itself, but depends solely upon the reader’s perception of form and function.73 This means that in an Horatius *sermo*, satire is neither defined by verse form, nor by capacity or incapacity to change the life of the one who reads

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it, but rather by the way the last reader has perceived it. Keeping in mind that for Kuiper, $C$ designates the creator, or the empirical author; $C'$, the inferred creator or textual author; $S$, the state of things; $a$, the cultural act or artifact and, in the end, the object of the satire; $a'$, other acts or artifacts with which $a$ has similarities and, finally, the antecedents of $a$; and $P$, the perceiver – for an act $a$ to be apprehended by $P$ as satire, the following conditions need to come together:

1) that $P$ thinks that, by means of $a$, $C'$ intends that the perceiver adopt a negative vision of $S$;
2) that $P$ thinks that, by means of $a$, $C'$ intends that the perceiver find formal similarities with $a'$;
3) that $P$ thinks that $C'$ intended that the similarities referred to above were humorous.$^{74}$

If the existence of $C'$ doesn’t even depend on the perception by $P$ that $a$ can change his perspective on $S$; if the intention of $C'$ doesn’t result from the perception of similarity of form or from the perception of humor, then the intentionality underlying this perspective is very weak and matters little for the definition of satire. But if, concerning the three conditions considered above and for us to be sure that the acts and artifacts taken into account are nothing other than satires, we consider the problem of intentionality, not from the point of view of $P$ in relation to $C'$, but of $C$ relative to $P$, we will have strong intentionality, that, after all, considers satire to be only the cases in which $C$ and $P$ coincide respectively.

$^{74}$ Kuiper (1984) 463.
in terms of intentions and in their interpretation of them. The limits of this point of view are obvious because it does not admit the possibility of existing satires of anonymous authors, and where it is not possible to demonstrate restrictedly the formal parallels, and where it is enough for the perceiver to imagine that C’ intends him to find humor in the composition. Kuiper adds a fourth condition to the three distinguished above, and presumed in the refutation conducted below: “The actual creation of a’ antedates the actual creation of a.”\(^75\)

But, in the case that a’ is posterior to a, we can’t demand that P consider the similarities between a and a’, when neither C nor C’ were able to take them into account.

Besides considering the parody as a particular kind of satire, where S is a’, and admitting the possibility of uncertainty to be inherent in the various conditions, Kuiper defends the importance of the context in the determination of what constitutes the satirical character of an object or act. However valuing these specific cultural elements depends on pragmatic factors. This means that the conditions of perception vary qualitatively from situation to situation and from perceiver to perceiver. The optimizing of the perception of something as satire depends on the following types of local conditions: contextual, which imply the knowledge by P of certain examples of a; related to the historical and literary context, namely with the P’s conscience of the practice, in a given moment, of satirising a; and

\(^{75}\) Kuiper (1984) 466.
sociocultural, concerned with the knowledge that $P$ must have of the existence and of some characteristics of the targets. The critic concludes: “Thus strong intentionalism can be seen as part of the theory of pragmatics which follows from the central theory of the perception of satire but which is not part of that theory. So it might be unusual for $P$ to suppose that $a$ is a satire in the mistaken belief that $a'$ antedates $a$. But it is not impossible that he should do so and the theory predicts that it is in the nature of satire that it should be possible (but unlikely).”

We reflected long on Kuiper’s theory because of the fact that it adds a new urgency to the possibility that, in the title *Saturae Menippeae*, more than a simple reference is implied – on the part of the perceiver Varro – to the occasional mixing of prose and verse in Menippus’ work. Besides, it still allows us to take account the modernity and timelessness of the satirical side of Petronius’ novel. It is the cultivated reader who must detect the refined irony that presides over the incoherence between words and actions of the *scholastici*. This, in turn, reveals the fact that the intellectuals are simply not well adjusted to the world around them, impelling them to invoke the values celebrated by the literature of the past, so that, via parody, the decadence of the present becomes even bitterer. Ultimately it is the vices of the past which are invoked in order to show their continuity with the contemporaneity, or even to adapt the Menippean

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76 Kuiper (1984) 472.
77 Deceit, disguise, luxury, futile relationships and sacrilege,
the ambiance of imperial Rome. However, once more, the connection of the episode with mystery cults seems to have gone unnoticed by scholars of Petronius, a fact which is even more surprising especially as it is certain that some critics have already documented the relationship with Orphism.43 Yet according to the theogony attributed to this sect, Dionysus Zagreus would be the son of Zeus and Persephone. Some time after his birth, Zeus would have installed the boy on his throne, informing the other gods that he would now become the new king. It is at this juncture that the Titans draw him into a trap and end up killing him. The body of the little god is cut into seven pieces, which the giants boil, roast and, finally, eat. Furious, Zeus strikes the Titans with his lighting bolt and out of the resulting soot humanity is created. Finally, out of the still palpitating heart of the child, which has been guarded over by Athena, a new Dionysus is modeled.44 So, the death of the god did not end in destruction, since he himself is reborn, not to mention the fact that out of the ashes of his executors humanity arises. For this reason, death and consequently rebirth is a frequent motif in the rites of initiation, which presuppose that the neophyte must abandon his previous existence to be able to enjoy the privileges of the true mystes. In other words, these details and the fact that Croton had been a flourishing center of Orphism,

43 It is worth pondering the observations of Cameron (1970), esp. 413; Fedeli (1987) 20-21; Nardomarino (1990) 57.
44 Vide the suggestive analysis of the myth by West (1983) 140-175.
would seem to support our seeing in the end of the *Satyricon* the parodic celebration of the ritual sacrifice of Dionysus Zagreus. Indeed, the public nature of the act (*astante populo*) seems to reinforce this hypothesis.\(^4^5\)

In his will, Eumolpos omits the form in which his carcass must be consumed. However, in the discussion that follows the reading of the conditions to be fulfilled, the condiments with which meats are seasoned are referred to (141.8), such that we should not eliminate the hypothesis that the body of the old man could be cooked, a detail that has some importance in the Orphic version of the myth.

On the other hand, it so happens that the Dionysian cult has certain elements that have a certain affinity with the *Satyricon*’s final scene. In fact, it was characteristic of the ritual of the bacchants that, at the peak of their delirium, a wild animal should be caught by them, which they then would tear to pieces with their bare hands (*sparagmos*) and finally eat raw (*omophagia*). With these final phases complete, the celebrants were capable of acquiring momentarily the Dionysian vitality. What is more, there are some indications that, initially, the victim has perhaps been human, the possibility of which the myth of Pentheus could be reminiscent.\(^4^6\) In general terms, therefore, it would not be utterly unmerited to interpret the closing of the *Satyricon* in light of this ritual: the *hereditetae* were at the point of fulfilling the last

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\(^4^5\) We should also note that, in the myth, Orpheus himself was torn to pieces by the furious Thracian women.

\(^4^6\) Vide Burkert (1985) 161-167; 290-295.
phases of the Dionysian ritual, with the goal of reaching ecstasy, which in this case would be the supposed wealth of the old man, Eumolpos (hypostasis of the theatrical divinity).

Until now, the similarities that we have proposed between Eumolpos and the three great Greek initiation cults (the Eleusinian mysteries, the Dionysian cult and Orphism/Pythagoreanism) have always been seen from the perspective of parody. This reading is legitimate, as parody, satire and caricature itself are amply used by Petronius throughout the whole of the novel. However, it is unknown how the work finishes and that contingency should dissuade us from overly bold speculations upon the final significance of the work. In spite of this, perhaps there would be some advantage in postulating a more serious reading of the final scene of the *Satyricon*. Maybe the evocation of the sacrifice of Dionysus Zagreus (which caused, in accordance with the myth, the creation of humanity) aims to suggest a “rebirth” of the novel’s characters, once the old life of schemes and wandering is abandoned. Maybe the symbolic freeing of Eumolpos’s companions might signify a passing of the baton to the new generations, once the period of apprenticeship and initiation have concluded. In this sense, would gain consistency the hypothesis that, along with the ironic portrait of a decadent society, the *Satyricon* also transmits certain hints of hope and regeneration.
Apart from the real pertinence of this interpretation, what is certain is that the analysis of the figure of Eumolpos (as earlier that of Giton) provides us with a clarifying example of the care taken by Petronius in the construction of the main characters of the *Satyricon* and of the different levels of reading that he intentionally created, through the confluence in a single character of multiple lines deriving from literary and cultural tradition. This is as well one of the most important aspects, that guarantee the interest and the lasting quality of such a unique work as the *Satyricon*. That is why it cannot also be overlooked.
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