

# Roman Novel and Satire of the Empire: Petronius' *Satyricon*

Dr. Alan Haffa

Please Silence Cell Phones

# Historical Context

- Petronius: *elegantiae arbiter* (judge of taste);
- Mid-first century, court of Nero,
- Epicurean;
- Accused of treason, committed suicide; list of Nero's debaucheries;
- Moral Decline of Rome



# Origins and Etymology

- Greek Romance (Alexandrian)
- Satyr: synonymous with salacious
- Satire: *satura*, a medley, a mixed dish; a satire, poetic medley set to music and sung on the stage
- Novel: *novellus*, new, young;



# Critique of Epic and Roman Society

- Parody of Greek Romance and Epic
- Since Epic is the genre that endorses and praises society, in satirizing Epic Petronius satirizes Roman society
- Noble war
- Ideal love
- Heroic individuals
- Rome will be shown to have strayed far from its Republican values

# Parody of Greek Romance

- Typical romance Plot: Sentimental and Romantic and Melodramatic; noble girls meets noble boy; separation; pursuit and obstruction; marriage
- Encolpius (crotch) loves boy, Giton; also loved by friend, Ascyltus; married woman Tryphaena; Eumolpus the poet.
- Melodrama of the jealous Encolpius, the fight over the boy; his scheming to avoid both lovers.

# Giton as Lucretia

- Giton bursts into tears and tells Encolpius:
- "It's that man," he sobbed, "the one you call your brother, your friend, Ascyllus. He ran up to my garret a little while ago and tried to take me by force. When I screamed for help, he pulled out his sword, "If you want to play Lucretia, boy," he cried, "you've met your Tarquin."

# Parody of Epic

- Giton is the unmoved mover of the plot, like Helen of Troy.
- Encolpius compared to Odysseus: renamed Polyainos, “much praised” epithet of Odysseus; Harassed by a god, Priapus, as Odysseus was by Poseidon; Shipwreck;
- Homeric Recognition: Giton’s scream during whipping and Encolpius’ “physical peculiarity”



# Recognition Scene: Epic Convention Parodied

- “Tryphaena’s heart, however, had already told her who it was and she fairly flew to the boy. Lichas, an old acquaintance of mine, indeed once an intimate friend, ran up as though he’d heard me shout, and quite ignoring my face and hands, stared fixedly at me. Then exploring me with an expert hand, he said, “Hello, Encolpius.” So it can hardly be a matter for much surprise that Ulysses’ old nurse, even after an absence of twenty years, should instantly have recognized her master’s scar, when this clever man instantly put his finger on the one physical peculiarity that gave me away...”

# Mock Warfare: Parodies Epic

- “Suddenly, however, our gallant Giton turned the edge of his razor against his own manhood, threatening at one fell blow to lop away the root of all our troubles.”
- Tryphaena: “What folly, what fury, transposes peace with war? What excuse for war have we? No prince of Troy here bears his ravished Spartan bride away; no frenzied Medea at her brother’s body hacks. Only love disprized; unrequited love, our only casus belli. Why then this war when the raging sea makes war against us all?”

# Social Satire

- Trimalchio:  
Wealthy freedman  
who lacks all  
sophistication
- Fresco that mixes  
Homer, with his  
own deeds and a  
gladiatorial match
- P. 40-41



- Food presented as part of the 12 zodiacal signs
- "In still another tray, lay fat capons and sowbellies and a hare tricked out with wings to look like a little Pegasus. At the corners of the tray stood four little gravy boats, all shaped like the Satyr Marsyas, with phalluses for spouts and a spicy hot gravy dripping down over several large fish swimming about in the lagoon of the tray."

## Dinner of Trimalchio: Hedonism



# Trimalchio Spares a Slave

- Caesar's Misericordia
- Juggler falls off ladder onto Trimalchio
- "instead of having the boy whipped, Trimalchio ordered him to be set free, so that nobody could say that the great Trimalchio had been hurt by a mere slave."

# Fortuna

- Trimalchio's poem: "We think we're awful smart, we think we're awful wise, but when we're least expecting, comes the big surprise. Lady Luck's in heaven and we're her little toys, so break out the wine and fill your glasses, boys!"
- His wife is Fortuna
- Dais and statue of her in home

# Ganymede Critiques Roman Corruption

- "But nobody mentions the real thing, the way the price of bread is pinching. God knows, I couldn't buy a mouthful of bread today. And this damn drought goes on and on. Nobody's had a bellyful for years now. It's those rotten officials...they're in cahoots with the bakers...so the little people get it in the neck, but in the rich man's jaws it's jubilee all year."

# Summary: Moral Decline of Rome

- Money as dominant value of Rome: Trimalchio  
“Money makes the man; Big Money, Big Man”
- By the mid-first century a man could rise from a freedman to a rich government official but not all Romans saw this as good. The means of success was not always virtue and hard work, but luck, or more often than not, the right connections and bribery.
- Epicureanism is presented as Hedonism
- Food, friendship, sex: everything is for sale