

INTRODUCTION

Author

The remarkable sketch of Petronius by the Roman historian Tacitus (c. 56–115) remains the best introduction to him:

With regard to [Caius] Petronius, I ought to dwell a little on his antecedents. His days he passed in sleep, his nights in the business and pleasures of life. Others achieved greatness by the sweat of their brows; Petronius idled into fame, and he was reckoned not a debauchee and spendthrift, like most of those who squander their substance, but a man learned in luxury. And indeed his talk and his doings, the freer they were and the more show of carelessness they exhibited, were the better liked, for their look of natural simplicity. Yet as proconsul of Bithynia and soon afterwards as consul, he showed himself a man of vigour and equal to business. Then falling back into vice or affecting vice, he was chosen by Nero to be one of his few intimate associates – as Arbiter of Elegance – since the emperor thought nothing charming or elegant unless it won the approval of Petronius. Hence jealousy on the part of Tigellinus, who looked on him as a rival and even his superior in the science of pleasure. And so Tigellinus worked on Nero's cruelty, which dominated every other passion, charging Petronius with having been the friend of Scaevinus, bribing a slave to become informer, robbing him of the means of defence, and hurrying into prison the greater part of his domestics.

It happened at the time that the emperor was on his way to Campania and that Petronius, after going as far as Cumae, was there detained. He bore no longer the suspense of fear or of hope. Yet he did not fling away life with precipitate haste, but having made an incision in his veins and then, according to his humour, bound them up, he again opened them, while he conversed with his friends, not in a serious strain or on topics that might win for him the glory of courage. And he listened to them as they repeated, not thoughts on the immortality of the soul or on the theories of philosophers, but

light poetry and playful verses. To some of his slaves he gave liberal presents, a flogging to others. He dined, and indulged himself in sleep, that death, though forced on him, might have a natural appearance. Even in his will he did not, as did many in their last moments, flatter Nero or Tigellinus or any other of the men in power. On the contrary, he described fully the prince's shameful excesses, with the names of his male and female companions and their novelties in debauchery, and sent the account under seal to Nero. Then he broke his signet-ring, that it might not be subsequently available for imperiling others.

(Ann. 16. 18-19: After A. J. Church and W. J. Brodribb)

While scholars have puzzled over the fact that Tacitus here refers to a C. Petronius, while most manuscripts of the *Satyrica* refer to the author as Petronius Arbiter or simply Arbiter, most are now persuaded that these references are to one and the same person for two reasons: i) the few datable references in the *Satyrica* fit the early imperial period (mid-first century AD) in which Tacitus' Petronius lived; ii) both the manuscripts of the *Satyrica* and Tacitus associate the very rare name Arbiter with that of Petronius. In the manuscripts Arbiter is a cognomen, in Tacitus it is part of Petronius' sobriquet at the court of Nero – *elegantiae arbiter* or Arbiter of Elegance.¹

In fact, it is far easier to explain how Tacitus or his sources (or the transmission of the text of Tacitus or of the *Satyrica*) might have jumbled the names than it is to explain the uncanny congruity of Tacitus' sketch of Petronius' character and death with the aesthetics of Petronius' masterpiece. In both we find a systematic and paradoxical inversion of Roman norms. Day and night, work and play, virtue and vice are displaced and re-evaluated, as Tacitus' portrait of the author repeatedly counterpoints values real and apparent. For example, Petronius is described as lazy but yet as earning the same reputation as the industrious; he sleeps all day but at night 'shows himself a man of vigor and equal to business' – including the business of pleasure. While squandering his resources makes him sound like a 'debauchee and a spendthrift', Tacitus introduces these strongly pejorative terms² only to negate them (*non*) in favor of the memorable oxymoron 'learned in luxury' (*erudito luxu*). Similarly, Petronius' words and deeds are described as artfully contrived but precisely to produce the appearance of simplicity, not of artifice. Indeed, Tacitus, usually so firm in his moral judgments,

seems unsure whether he wishes to censure Petronius as a self-indulgent eccentric or to praise him as a brave courtier, just as he admits to not knowing whether Petronius was actually vicious or merely pretended to be to survive at Nero's court (Tacitus, 16.18.2). What could be more Petronian than this narrative situation where the narrator, the sober historian interested in the facts, is not sure what to count as real and what is merely pretended? If Tacitus' Petronius did not write the *Satyrical*, he should have.

This impression is reinforced by the fact that Tacitus focuses his account on Petronius' response to his own impending death, a topic central to the *Satyrical*. Petronius' accomplishments in the 'science of pleasure' evidently excited the jealousy of another powerful courtier, Tigellinus, the commander of the Imperial Bodyguard. In the context of court intrigue this led to denunciations and finally to Petronius' detention. We are not explicitly told that Petronius was invited to commit suicide, only that he rejected the possibility of reprieve and would not play the emperor's game of hope and fear. Instead, faced with the same grim choice forced on so many others by Nero, he took control of the situation by opening his own veins. By refusing to cultivate a reputation for courage or to discourse on high-minded subjects such as the immortality of the soul, and preferring instead to listen to 'light poetry' and 'playful verses'; – and even to sleep and dine – Petronius deliberately turned his own death scene into a veritable parody of the traditional philosophical stance toward death associated most famously with Socrates (in Plato's *Phaedo*) and, more recently, with Seneca, who had been given a death sentence by Nero only the year before and whose heroic death is also described by Tacitus³ (AD 65: *Ann.* 16.61–4). Petronius' determination to control his own exit from life – to make a death forced on him seem natural and even willed – again forcefully recalls a scene from his novel in which the most memorable character, Trimalchio, reveals a prophecy of his own death and rehearses his own funeral in detail in the midst of a lavish banquet. He even composes a funerary epitaph for himself that concludes with a jab at philosophers. But while Trimalchio grows maudlin and absurd, Petronius does not. Even while joking and shunning heroic gestures he refuses to buckle under to the emperor and flatter him in his will, just as he refuses the consolations of philosophy. Instead his last act is one of satire, an

explicit description of the emperor's novel vices including the names of his sexual partners, both male and female. Yet even at this moment Petronius does not neglect the details: he destroys his signet ring so that it cannot be used to implicate others. (According to another source, [Pliny the Elder, *N.H.* 37.20], he also broke a precious agate ladle so that the emperor's table could not inherit it, a gesture Trimalchio would have appreciated.) Petronius was clearly no less determined than was his creation Trimalchio to maintain the artist's control of experience up to the very end – and beyond it. Thanks to Tacitus' artistry he succeeds.⁴

Aside from Tacitus' telling portrait and the brief reference in Pliny, we know almost nothing of Petronius.⁵ And Tacitus does not even mention the novel. We can add to these reports only a single comment found in an essay by Plutarch entitled 'How to Tell a Flatterer From a Friend': 'Next comes that dangerous practice so ruinous of foolish men when the flatterer accuses them of tendencies and weaknesses just the opposite of those they have ... [for example,] they will reproach profligate and lavish spenders for being stingy and mean, as Titus Petronius did with Nero' (60d–e). Plutarch's charge of flattery shows little appreciation of irony or of the context of Petronius' utterance. After all, Plutarch had little experience of megalomaniacal emperors.⁶ In retrospect it is clear that Petronius was playing with fire in teasing the emperor about his notorious extravagance.

What conclusions can be drawn from this evidence relevant to a reading of the *Satyrica*? Probably very little that we could not have inferred from the novel itself given that literature was produced by and for a much smaller segment of society in antiquity than it is even in our own day. This fact and the evidence of the *Satyrica* itself would have led us to infer an author who was part of, or associated with, the Roman ruling classes, who was intimately familiar with their cultural and social frames of reference without necessarily sharing them. Yet, we still do not know such elementary facts as where and when Petronius was born or how he was educated. We can make plausible inferences about the latter in the light of Petronius' position in Roman society, but that is merely to ascribe typical experience to an author who interests us precisely because he is singular. We have no reports about Petronius as a writer, critic or social commentator, only as a courtier. We might well wonder what

this talented operator thought of Nero, of Rome, of empire, but we do not know.

Still, Petronius' role as, in effect, overseer of arts for a volatile emperor who desperately wished to be seen as an artist⁷ is precisely the kind of public role we might expect of an author endowed with the singular sophistication and brilliant eccentricity in evidence throughout the *Satyrical*. More specifically, Petronius' prominence at Nero's court means that we are justified in assuming that he was aware of the literary activities of his contemporaries such as Seneca, the philosopher, dramatist, and courtier, (AD 4-65); his nephew the epic poet Lucan (AD 39-65); and the satirist Persius (AD 34-62). But how does Petronius' work stand in relation to theirs or, more generally, to the practice of literature as it was then conceived? Who were his literary models? Who formed his audience? How can we make sense of the *Satyrical*'s unconventional aesthetics in the context of classical literary culture? Such questions lead us directly to the problem of the *Satyrical*'s genre, and away from biographical speculation and court intrigue.

Genre

It may seem odd that virtually the only type of literature widely read today – prose fiction – should pose a problem of genre in a classical context. What could be easier to place generically or more accessible to contemporary readers than a work of prose fiction? What, in short, is the problem?

First, any reader of the *Satyrical* will notice that it is unlike most contemporary prose fiction in containing many passages of verse in various meters, some of them going on for pages. For while genres persist over very long periods of time, indeed for centuries, they are also subject to a continual process of change, as is the cultural context of their production and reception. Any given example of a genre is formally determined by a wide range of culturally specific engagements as well as by its ruling generic design. The practice of Athenian tragedy, for example, differs significantly from that of Elizabethan or modern forms of tragedy, but they have enough features in common for us to feel justified in grouping them together generically as 'tragedy'. Knowledge of the cultural context in which particular examples of a genre developed allows us to decipher conventions peculiar to them,

and thus learn how to read them. Every genre of literature is in this sense also a form of experience for readers – ‘a specific form of thinking, a way of visualizing the world’ not otherwise available.⁸ To locate any work within a given genre as it existed in a specific cultural context creates certain expectations and, hence, frames for interpreting what we read.

The problem posed by the genre of the *Satyricon* is complicated by the fact that it is the earliest extant work of prose fiction in Latin: we cannot compare Petronius’ practice with that of his Roman predecessors to see how he shaped the genre for his own aesthetic purposes. Further, most ancient genres had long traditions behind them that served to define their constituent elements – their matter, manner, means, and specific effects. While writers were, of course, always free to innovate, the traditional conception of the genres determined the parameters within which experimentation could be recognized as such. None of this applies to prose fiction (as it does to classical verse genres), since it lacked an authoritative canon or acknowledged set of aesthetic norms – except for those implicit in popular but uncanonical examples of the genre. As the last major literary tradition to emerge in antiquity, prose fiction never received the critical attention or cultural prestige of the older classical kinds such as epic, lyric and drama.

Indeed, the singularity of the *Satyricon* may seem to be at odds with the very idea of genre as a set of repeatable rules and conventions; but, in fact, genre yields the only means of grasping that singularity and specifying its distinguishing features within the context of classical literary culture. While Petronius may have written the first full scale novel in Latin, there would of course have been many kinds of narrative already familiar to him and his audience: the mythological narratives found in classical epic, lyric and dramatic poetry in both Greek and Latin; popular prose genres in written form such as Greek romance, romanticized history and travel literature; popular dramatic genres such as New Comedy and the Mime in both Greek and Latin; and oral genres of many kinds including fables, jokes, ghost stories, apothegms and the other ingredients of folklore. And then there are works and traditions that seem to straddle or confound the dichotomy of oral versus written genres⁹ such as *The Life of Aesop*, a collection of jokes and comic vignettes about the legendary dwarfish, ugly, and mute but clever slave, Aesop; or the

Milesian tales, a tradition of bawdy tales like the French fabliaux (referred to by Apuleius in the prologue to *The Golden Ass*) that do not survive outside of their appearance in the Roman novel. What distinguishes the *Satyrical* is not just that it responds to such a remarkable range of narrative forms (including even non-narrative genres of lyric poetry) but that it reshapes and combines them as only a novel can – by bringing them into a dialogue mediated by a narrating consciousness. What results is something without attested classical precedent.¹⁰

Latin literature as a whole can usefully be considered as an extended response to the literary culture of Greece, which dominated classical civilization from beginning to end. While it is obviously beyond the scope of an introduction – not to mention the patience of our readers – to delineate the relationship of Petronius to all the varieties of Greek and Latin literature to which he responds, his approach to two genres in particular can serve to exemplify his working methods. At this point many introductory accounts of Petronius will confidently assert his defining relationship to one of two genres, both Greek in origin, namely, Menippean satire and romance. While both traditions are of central importance to Petronius, to suggest that his work somehow bears the same relationship to these genres as, for example, Senecan tragedy does to Hellenistic or Republican tragedy, or the satires of Persius do to those of Horace, is to misconstrue the nature of the novel as a genre.

Neither Menippean satire nor romance is an ancient generic term but both genres are ancient and well documented. Menippean satire is usually identified as a form that mixes verse and prose – as if this feature alone could define a genre or could not be found in some form in other genres as different as Platonic dialogue or Greek romance! But the idea of mixtures and misalliances of all kinds is generically significant, and the impropriety by classical standards of embedding characters who speak verse in a prose narrative exemplifies this tendency.¹¹ Historically Menippean satire refers to a tradition of satiric parody that goes back to the Cynic parodist and polemicist Menippus of Gadara (third century BC), whose influence is remarkable but whose writings are lost. This tradition entered Latin literature through the free adaptations of the learned Varro (first century BC). The earliest extant example of Menippean satire, however, is the *Apocolocyntosis*, an exuberant parody of the deification of the

emperor Claudius attributed to Petronius' contemporary Seneca. A glance at this work reveals the central ingredients of the genre: a fantastic journey from this world to that of myth that progresses by multiple forms of parody and mythological burlesque as told by a ridiculous narrator intent on answering some question that defies mortal knowledge. In Seneca the question is: 'what happened in heaven when the emperor Claudius, deified after death, arrived hoping to join the ranks of the immortals?' (Everyone knows what happened on earth, comments the narrator, since no one forgets his own good luck! [*Apoc.* 5]) The *Apocolocyntosis* therefore resembles not a novel, but the extant Greek examples of Menippean satire, the Menippus narratives of Lucian (second century AD), in which the quest of the Cynic hero, Menippus, makes mythological parody a vehicle for satirizing humanity in general, and philosophers in particular, in the course of attempting to answer a single urgent but overwhelming question – 'What is the best kind of life for human beings?'

If this all sounds distinctly odd, then we have managed to convey an accurate idea of this genre. As a current historian of the Menippean tradition has argued: 'Menippean satire is abnormal in all of its aspects. It is an anti-genre; insofar as it is a satire it is ultimately a satire on literature itself and all its pretensions to meaning.'¹² This sounds, in turn, suspiciously postmodern, and that may explain why Menippean satire has received so much attention in recent decades after being all but forgotten for generations.

It is highly significant that apart from Menippean satire the most important literary tradition for Petronius, namely, romance, comes from the opposite end of the literary spectrum. Menippean satire is a self-consciously written form, the product of a learned, chirographic culture, and as such it is a literary composite completely alien to the older oral traditions of mythical narrative that it appropriates for parody and satire. It is accordingly radically mixed in form, critical in intent, and satirically estranging in its effects. Its means and ends are thus deeply expressive of the literate, writerly culture that gave rise to it. This fact is most obvious when we consider the demands it makes on its audience's knowledge of previous literature and philosophy, without which much of its humor and, hence, its *raison d'être* is lost. Its sophisticated and irreverent play with inherited literary forms con-

trasts sharply with the conservative stance toward the classical canon assumed by romance, just as its *recherché* subject matter contrasts with the more popular themes of romance.

Greek romance emerges in the works of Chariton of Aphrodisias (first century BC/AD?) and Xenophon of Ephesus (second century BC?) as an idealizing and sentimental form of narrative that recounts in excited tones the love, separation and reunion of two beautiful young heterosexual Greeks, who embody much of what their culture admired. The separation – effected by pirates, storms, gods and rivals – delays the predictable *dénouement*, thereby creating much of the narrative's appeal, its suspense (what will happen?) and its mystery (why did it happen?).¹³ The delay puts the heroine and the hero under stress and thus generates the 'sentiment', that is, 'the representations of feeling, anxieties and moral choices' that provide the real source of interest and value in 'sentimental romance'.¹⁴ Thus, as David Lodge observes, structurally the love story consists of the delayed fulfilment of desire – of the heroine's desire for the man she wants and of the reader's desire for the answers to the questions raised by narrative suspense and mystery.¹⁵

The general shape of the plot, its use of a unified literary language, its quasi heroic characters and its wish-fulfilling ending that affirms society's future through marriage all align Greek romance with the Odyssean narrative paradigm,¹⁶ which it translates into the contemporary prosaic world of its Hellenistic and Roman audiences. While Menippean satire appeals to our intellect and aims to demystify the great traditions of myth and philosophy while exposing the world's hocus pocus – such as the deification of emperors among other idols of the tribe – the ends of romance are just the opposite: to engage our imaginative sympathies as fully as possible in the improbably romantic adventures of star-crossed lovers – the perennial ingredients of popular fiction from Chariton to the Harlequin romances. In other words, if Menippean satire is a seriocomic critique of the inherited myths of classical culture, ancient romance is its generic antitype – a new myth, that of *eros* in the cosmopolitan Greek world that surrounded the ancient Mediterranean in the wake of Alexander's conquests and the Greek diaspora.¹⁷ The radically differing aesthetics of the two genres may imply corresponding differences in the audiences addressed by each, although such distinctions

cannot be easily made within the elite world of classical literary culture.¹⁸

While it has often been noted that Petronius is funnier than the other ancient writers of prose fiction, it is not often recognized how central the humor is to his novelistic aesthetic. The sophisticated humor and ironic tone of Petronius' narrative have their origin in his novelistic fusion of two genres that differ radically in form, tone, style, characteristic effects and, perhaps, even in the audiences addressed. Out of this hybridization, crossbreeding, or fusion of genres emerged what can fairly be called the first novel.¹⁹ These metaphors for literary invention are not meant to suggest a homogeneous blending, or simple combination of known ingredients – like a vinaigrette salad dressing – but something so paradoxical and strange as to be suspect – like 'cold fusion'. Menippean satire is of crucial importance precisely because it is formally disruptive and intrusive, a satiric solvent that acts as a catalyst for generic mixture and mutation but in this case within a fictional narrative framework that originates in romance. Inside this framework the Menippean mode of writing permits movement up and down the literary scales (high and low, oral and literary, verse and prose) and between genres and forms of speech that would either not appear in literary discourse at all (e.g., the freedmen's speeches [37 ff.] or the report on Trimalchio's holdings [53]²⁰) or not in contiguity with one another (e.g., Eumolpus' epic recital follows a scene of scatological comedy [117–18]).

This account is of course still a fairly broad simplification. Petronius draws on a great variety of discourses, including works we no longer have, and he draws on different genres in fundamentally different ways depending on their place in the canon and their function in his narrative.²¹ The traditions of Menippean satire and Greek romance should be conceived as important subtexts, as two of a series of shifting generic frames of reference, not as 'sources' for the *Satyricon*. It is of course what Petronius does with them that makes his work so obviously different from either. If romance remains his most conspicuous model it is because it is the only kind of prose fiction – as opposed to traditional storytelling – that he would have known. While recent papyrological discoveries suggest that Greek fiction may have been more varied than was once thought,²² the tradition that runs from Chariton to Heliodorus (third to fourth century AD)

makes it clear that the dominant strain was idealizing and sentimental and is in general much closer to what is suggested by the generic term 'romance' than by the more modern English term 'novel'. This distinction is a complicated one that does not hinge only on subject matter – such as the heroine-centered plot of romance – but also on the parodic manner in which the novel reflects the values, premises, and conventions of romance. The relationship of Fielding to Richardson, or of Cervantes to chivalric romance, provides a useful model for understanding Petronius' relationship to Greek romance. Just as reading Richardson will enhance our appreciation of the comedy of *Joseph Andrews*, so Petronius' many forms of parody will be far more accessible to those who have also read Chariton and the Greek romancers.²³

This account of the genre of the *Satyricon* might be taken to suggest that the novel is a strictly literary phenomenon that bears little relation to the historical context of its origins. But this, once again, would be to misconstrue the nature of the novel as a genre and, hence, its relationship to the institution of literature – the inherited modes of writing, speaking, and thinking.

While narrative may be of antediluvian antiquity, novelistic narrative is not. As Plato points out in his classic analysis of narrative discourse in Book III of the *Republic*, epic, the most prestigious and influential form of narrative in antiquity, alternates exclusively between two distinct modes of discourse – that of the poet/narrator (*diegesis*) and that of the characters (*mimesis*). The poet is either speaking in the narrator's voice (*diegesis*) or 'imitating' the voices of characters in directly quoted speech (*mimesis*). There are only very limited forms of indirect speech in Homer.²⁴ The voice of the poet/narrator and that of his characters are therefore kept clearly distinct by the use of formulaic introductions, as if by quotation marks, precisely because they are so linguistically homogeneous as to be otherwise indistinguishable. Indeed, the characters and the narrator speak the very same language, so the kind of variety and individuality of speech we expect from a novel is not possible. Furthermore, our access to the consciousness of the characters is limited to the poet's narration of their actions (*diegesis*) and his direct quotation of their words (*mimesis*). The formal history of the novel is the story of how the relations between *mimesis* and *diegesis* were altered to permit more varied and subtle ways of representing the consciousness of others – of characters – through forms of