Petronius’ *Satyricon* has often been dubbed the most controversial and daedalic text in classical literature. The question of whether and how it should count as “satiric” has long preoccupied scholars, yet this contention is part of a broader debate about how to define a work parasitic on almost every known literary form, from the Greek romance (which it is often said to parody)\(^1\) to epic, historiography, New Comedy, Roman erotic elegy, the Milesian tale, and Greek and Roman mime. As Zeitlin argues, the *Satyricon* “seems to have been undertaken with the deliberate intention of defeating the expectations of an audience accustomed to an organising literary form.”\(^2\) There will always be problems involved in singling out one model or frame of expectations for such a generically complex text.

The *Satyricon*, or *Satyrica* (Greek genitive or nominative plural, with the former presuming the addition of *libri*, meaning “things associated with satyrs”), is an extended first person narrative told in the voice of Encolpius, a vagabond, myopic scholar who is also a protagonist in the events he recounts. The text survives fragmented: we probably have parts of (at least) books 14 and 16 and all of book 15, which likely coincided with the famous feast of Trimalchio, yet the original length remains a mystery.\(^3\) Scholars today generally agree that the author of the *Satyricon* was probably the Petronius whose portrait is penned by Tacitus in *Annals* 16.17ff., the Neronian courtier nicknamed “Arbiter of Elegance.”\(^4\) According to Tacitus, Petronius was forced to suicide by palace intrigues in CE 66: after posting off a missive to the princeps cataloguing every one of Nero’s “secret” deviancies, he severed his life.

---


\(^2\) Zeitlin (1971a) 635.


\(^4\) Note that Tacitus’ Petronius looks to be the same man mentioned in Pliny, *Naturalis Historia* 37.20, yet Pliny gives a different *praenomen* (“T. Petronius”).
veins and died slowly (as if “naturally”) at a banquet, drinking and reciting frivolous lyrics all the while (for readers of the *Satyricon*, this scene looks like a flashback to Trimalchio’s *cena*, with all its grisly luxury, fakery, and literary parody). The cognomen “Arbiter” is attested in the manuscript tradition of the *Satyricon*, as well as in other indirect pieces of evidence, and is commonly linked to Tacitus’ description. Clearly, if this is right, it fuels potential for reading the *Satyricon* as an edgy, provocative performance of Neronian literary culture. Politics (both Neronian politics and the politics of Petronius’ readers) become especially crucial when it comes to thinking about who or what the *Satyricon* may be satirizing.

The narrative of the *Satyricon* as we have it is lacunose, hard to follow, and varies considerably in pace and tone. The action unfolds in a *graeca urbs*, a coastal city of Campania, and begins with an exchange outside a rhetorical school between the narrator Encolpius and a teacher, Agamemnon. The story then follows Encolpius’ adventures, journeys, and scrapes with his gang of companions. The characters, especially Encolpius, who is (or sets himself up to look like) a dizzy, forgetful interpreter, live out literary and sexual fantasies, flit between epic and tragic poses, fall prey to (each others’) illusions and tricks, and repeatedly lose their way or drift in circles. There are no authorial subtitles to fill us in on the “reality” behind Encolpius’ reveries, to tell us whether and where we too, who view this world through Encolpius’ eyes, are being led up the garden path.

Events in the *Satyricon* are often precipitated by sexual jealousy (Encolpius and fellow rogue Ascytlos vie for the attentions of pretty boy Giton, who is also easy prey for Eumolpus, the poet who enters the story at *Satyricon* 83). First they are lured into Quartilla’s brothel, where Encolpius offends the goose sacred to Priapus, the god who then hounds him for the rest of the fiction (just as Poseidon plagued Odysseus), finally cursing him with impotence when he falls for a young beauty named Circe at *Satyricon* 126. It is out of that frying pan and into the fire of Trimalchio’s *cena*, a spectacular carnival feast hosted by the nouveau riche freedman which leaves the guests feeling paranoid, nauseous, and trapped. After escaping this “labyrinth,” and cat-fighting with Ascytlos over Giton, Encolpius wanders into a picture gallery where he encounters Eumolpus, who proceeds to recite a poem based on one of the pictures, his *Troiae Halosis*, “on the fall of Troy.” After a series of mishaps provoked by Eumolpus’ pursuit of Giton, the gang go undercover and board a ship captained (little do they know) by their tyrannical enemy Lichas. The badly disguised stowaways are discovered and punished, but just as Eumolpus is calming “civil war” with a Milesian tale (the tale of the widow of Ephesus), a storm brews, and the ship is wrecked. Washed up on foreign shores, the gang embark on a new voyage to Croton, a once glorious
city gone to rot and now inhabited solely by legacy hunters and their prey, the heirless rich. On the way, Eumolpus hatches a plan to play act as a wealthy, childless old man (the others are to play his slaves) in a bid to tease the legacy hunters, and while they are rehearsing this mime, he gives his second epic recital, the *Bellum Civile*. Once at Croton, Encolpius falls in love with Circe, but is paralysed by impotence, only recovering his virility after submitting to the tortuous “magic” of Croton’s witches. The story breaks off in the midst of a gory scene in which Eumolpus draws up a will demanding that his heirs cannibalize his corpse before they get their hands on his estate. We can only guess as to what happens next.

In the last century, opinion has generally been split between those critics who seek to package this slippery text as satire and those who prefer to categorize it, with Bakhtin, as a “novel.” The term novel is entirely modern: there is no equivalent label in the ancient world, and nor do theoretical discussions of texts like the *Satyricon* survive (literary critics were not much interested in them). In using the term novel of this text, modern critics flag the notion that the *Satyricon* transgresses the law of genre (for Slater, as for Bakhtin, the novel is an “anti-genre”) and highlight the possible affiliation between the *Satyricon* (along with Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses*) and the so-called Greek novels, written from the first to fourth century CE, which expand into lengthy narrative plots typical of Athenian New Comedy, that is, stories of thwarted love. The *Satyricon*, with its all-male love triangles and tales of lewd lust rather than chaste amour, has been seen by many to mischievously invert the idealized Greek romance. In labelling the *Satyricon* a novel, therefore, critics have both underscored its generic complexity, and privileged the background of the Greek romance, with a view to identifying Petronius as a light-hearted parodist, a writer of comedy.

Conversely, definitions of Petronius as a satirist have tended either to play down or to redirect this emphasis on comedy. Discussion of the satiric in the *Satyricon* is complicated by the fact that “satire” embraces both Roman verse satire (as written by Ennius, Lucilius, Horace, and Persius), and Menippean satire, two very distinct genres. What is more, not all critics would recognize the existence of Menippea to begin with: this is an anachronistic term which was invented in the Renaissance to account for the “mixed form” used by Petronius and most famously Seneca, in his *Apocolocyntosis*. It was inspired by the Cynic Menippus of Gadara, who lived in the third century BCE and wrote in a compound of prose and verse (*prosimetrum*), and also by the title of a work indebted to Menippus, Varro’s *Saturae Menippeae* (this

---

survives only in the scrappiest of fragments, while none of Menippus’ output is extant).

I will examine in detail (as far as space allows) the arguments for defining the *Satyricon* as Menippean satire below. But I first want to highlight a crucial common element in recent claims for identifying Petronius as a Roman satirist (whether Menippean or not): that is, the need to determine an implicit if not explicit moral authority in Encolpius’ impenetrable first person narrative, from which an aggressive (satiric) voice of censure is so obviously absent. Highet encapsulates this formula for diagnosis when he writes: “it cannot be satire, if Petronius is not a moralist. Conversely, if Petronius is not a moralist, his work is satire.”6 For Sullivan, the “edge of conventional satire” is (merely) “blunted” by the evident lack of moral impulsion in the text.7 Because the *Satyricon* has been, for a modern Anglo-American audience, such a disturbingly “immoral” work, the imperative to infer a strict moral voice has been intense (watching a documentary on pornography, a term that has often been used to describe the *Satyricon*, is, of course, far removed from enjoying a real X-rated movie). Readers must be reassured that “by satirising unnaturalness, he [Petronius] is in effect recommending naturalness,”8 or that racy passages are just harmless fun. For example, critics have sought in the poem at *Satyricon* 132.15 a defense of depravity straight from the author’s mouth: here, the narrator asks why pinched Catonian moralists overreact to a work whose only crime is a refreshing Epicurean honesty about the joy of sex.9 Yet sex in the *Satyricon* is rarely natural, simple, or pleasurable for those involved, more theatrical, tortuous, and depressing. Reading 132.15 as a peephole into authorial intention has helped to sanitize and naturalize those elements in the text which tend to cause modern audiences the most moral discomfort, just as the O family of manuscripts seems contrived “to prevent the *Satyricon* from conveying the wrong sort of pleasures.”10 That there is a complex history of needing to decipher satire in the *Satyricon* accounts in part for the presence of Petronius in this volume: we have come to accept that he belongs to (albeit on the margins of) a Roman satiric tradition, whereas authors such as Martial (about whom we have not asked the same questions) tend to slip just over the edge.

6 Highet (1941) 177. The following critics, with varying emphases, also view Petronius as a censuring moralist: Bacon (1958), Raith (1963), Arrowsmith (1966), Sochatoff (1962) and (1970). Also compare discussion in Walsh (1974), who fails to find in Petronius “a sufficiently solid base for the title of moralising satirist” (188), and in Zeitlin (1971a, 676) who argues, “it is idle to look in the *Satyricon* for a conventional moralist.”

If we can find “satire” in the *Satyricon*, then we can implicitly conjure up a missing authorial voice to validate our interpretation of the text. Of course, it would be far more disconcerting to read a *Satyricon* in which Encolpius rather than Petronius played the satirist, in which we were never quite sure whether to take our narrator as serious, ironic, self-deprecating, sardonic, manipulative, masochistic, canny, moronic . . . It is far safer to presume that, as Sullivan proposes, “the narrator is constantly made the unconscious butt of the author’s ridicule and satire.”  

Such an approach is in line with the old-fashioned view of the Roman satiric author as a sincere, elevated moralist: recent criticism, however, has emphasized how the Roman satirist constantly ventriloquizes, shifting between hyperbolic, contradictory, and hypocritical poses which pressure the limits of reader identification. It always takes one to know one, is satire’s paranoid, self-implicating maxim: “for no one is born without faults” (Horace, *Sermones* 1.3.68); the satirist’s thankless job is poking holes in your complacency, just as Trimalchio’s freedman howls (while also digging his own grave) “you can see the lice on others, but not the bugs on yourself” (57.7). The strategy whereby the satirist abdicates his role to an implicated narrator is already a familiar one from Roman verse satire, especially in book 2 of Horace’s *Sermones*, in which the principal speaking voice is not that of the author but of a character reporting back to him: Petronius could be seen to take this tactic to its furthest extreme.

The Menippean question

The question of whether the *Satyricon* should be counted as Menippean satire has troubled critics since the Renaissance, when the term Menippean was first used. The tradition of Menippean satire is one we have conceived in retrospect, and many of its reconstructed characteristics are based on inference or conjecture. Its most frequently quoted feature is the unusual concoction of prose and verse. Yet the famous *Iolaus* fragment, which was published in the early 1970s and seems to display many features in common with the *Satyricon* (e.g. a fusion of low theme and heroic allusion, the use of Sotadean verse), suggests that *prosimetrum* was also possible in the Greek novel.  

Aside from this core feature, which seems inadequate for defining an entire genre, the criteria for qualifying a text as Menippean are necessarily nebulous. For Relihan, “Menippean satire is abnormal in all of its aspects. It is an anti-genre, insofar as it is ultimately a satire on literature itself and all its pretensions to meaning.” For Kirk, it is a potpourri jumble of “flagrantly

---

Petronius, satire, and the novel
digressive narrative,” outlandish fictions about “fantastic voyages, dreams, visions, talking beasts,” drafted in “unconventional diction.” Bakhtin, who argues in his essay “Epic and Novel” that the Satyricon “is good proof that Menippean satire can expand into a huge picture,” is more precise in formulating the requirements of the genre. He proposes that Menippean satire is the literary expression of carnival, a genre directly descended from carnivalized folklore and a less direct descendant of the Socratic dialogues, which together influenced the Dostoevskian polyphonic novel; in short, Bakhtin wants to see embodied in the Menippea the ancient ingredients of the carnivalesque tradition of prose. Ancient Menippean satire is first and foremost comic, it is claimed, and closely associated with the Saturnalia, or “with the freedom of Saturnalian laughter.”

Seneca’s Apocolocyntosis arguably comes close to fulfilling all the itemized criteria, but Petronius’ fiction does not fit so neatly: in particular, we struggle to glimpse utopianism, or a vision of social utopia in the text (the action is truncated at Croton, an entrapping, dystopian cityscape far removed from Bakhtin’s fantasy of liberatory carnival); there is also no tripartite structure, beyond the hellish imagery of the Bellum Civile and hints that Trimalchio’s villa is to be imagined as an underworld. It may be countered that the Satyricon survives fragmented, and that Bakhtin is merely sketching an idiom: it must be taken for granted that the set of categories are descriptive rather than prescriptive, that no text will necessarily include all elements, especially as the idiom is to operate transhistorically.

Bakhtin wants to claim, straightforwardly, that the marginalized Menippea has been underestimated in the evolution of the novel. And as Connors reminds us,

16 Bakhtin (1981) 27. Other examples he gives of the form range from Apuleius’ Metamorphoses (“a full-blown Menippean satire” [1984], 133) and Boethius’ De consolatione philosophiae, to Dostoevsky’s story, “Bobok,” and works by various European authors including Shakespeare, Dickens, Swift, Cervantes, and Edgar Allan Poe.
part of the impulse to view Petronius within a Menippean framework had undoubtedly been the scarcity and fragmentation of surviving ancient Menippean texts. Counting Petronius as a Menippean satirist expands the number of ancient Menippean relatively well-preserved authors from two (Seneca and Lucian) to three.\textsuperscript{19}

It is clear that including the \textit{Satyricon} buttresses the case for the existence and coherency of this genre, so the impulse will always be to make it fit. Yet the question here must be: how useful is the category of Menippean satire for critics of Petronius, and (how) does it make a difference to the way we read the text?

The definition “Menippean” risks becoming an end in itself. Such a diagnosis can function to an extent as a placebo for readers uncomfortable with trying to jam Petronius’ square peg into the round hole of literary history, whether because it really was a one-off, experimental, Neronian blast, or because the texts that might help contextualize Petronius’ innovations do not survive.\textsuperscript{20} One of the most convincing arguments for genre is simply that it is a useful critical tool that facilitates debate on the relation between literary texts. Yet we have no way of ascertaining, for example, whether Petronius is adhering to or breaking any rules, for whatever effect. Menippean satire has the advantage of being a flexible, artificial category, “as changeable as Proteus,”\textsuperscript{21} and resistant “to coherent interpretation”:\textsuperscript{22} this allows us to evade pinning the \textit{Satyricon} down to a single genre, yet at the same time to be consoled by a label. Its unconventionality, so construed, boomerangs any interrogation it triggers: why is the \textit{Satyricon} longer than any other Menippean satire we have?\textsuperscript{23} Why does Petronius’ extended narrative move much more realistically through space and time than any other “Menippean” text we have? “Because it is experimenting in the very spirit of the genre . . .”

This is not to say that we can dismiss the Menippean tradition as merely a convenient construct: I would suggest, rather, that in the absence of evidence it is more reasonable to propose that Menippean satire is one of \textit{many} forms Petronius (ab)uses. As Conte notes, if Petronius creates expectations of Menippean satire, then it also looks as if he frustrates them.\textsuperscript{24} It is also important to realize that like “satire,” “Menippean satire” has been used to

\textsuperscript{19} Connors (1998) 16.

\textsuperscript{20} As Relihan notes ([1993] 91), “the recently discovered papyrus fragments of Greek prosimet-ric fiction have been sufficient for some to claim that Menippean satire is no longer relevant to the discussion.”


\textsuperscript{22} Relihan (1993) 91.

\textsuperscript{23} Relihan’s answer is that the \textit{Satyricon} is a picaresque novel “on which the Menippean genre has been imposed” (1993) 95.

\textsuperscript{24} Conte (1996) 168.
tag or veil a range of interpretative positions, which often contradict each other. For Coffey, the Menippea is an “alternative convention” of satire, which retains the moralizing thrust construed as distinctive of Roman verse satire: thus [it] “mocked or censured undesirable social behaviour.”

Kirk argues for a Menippean satire “essentially concerned with right learning or belief,” but Relihan, who proposes that the Satyricon’s “parody of satire” has its origins in the innovations of Varro’s Menippeans, suggests rather that the influence of Menippean satire dictates the absence of “any proper moral tone.”

Relihan’s Satyricon is a wry comedy which exposes its characters as moralizing hypocrites. Petronius’ critique of corrupt moralizing is indirect, therefore, and he does not propose any alternative way of thinking; the text is “funny” because characters are “naive,” blind to their own moral bankruptcy and unaware that their snobbish pretensions to scholarly superiority are ensnared in such a “degenerate” fiction. What makes the Satyricon a Menippean satire, Relihan argues, is its critical dimension: the narrator is “a hypocrite and a fool,” uniting scenes “through his wholly inadequate and comic attempts to understand them.”

Examples given of characters’ immoral moralizing include the rhetorical school scenes at Satyricon 1–5, Trimalchio’s pretensions of learning in the Cena, such as the poem at 55.6 on the evils of luxurious dining, and Eumolpus’ speeches prefacing the Troiae Halosis and the Bellum Civile. Yet there is perhaps more to add to Relihan’s analysis, which strives to concretize a satiric voice and dictate a single source and direction of humor in the text. It is difficult, for example, not to (also) read Trimalchio’s cue for a poem at 55.5 (“for what could be better written than these lines?”) as ironic bait, a move typical of the tyrant jester testing out how far his subject guests will continue to smile and applaud, through gritted teeth, even the most back-handed, ear-grating performance. (Such a reading is whetted by hints that Trimalchio may be a figure for Nero himself, and by the possibility that Petronius served as the Neronian arbiter of taste.)

So, too, it would be misleading to decree that Encolpius’ critique of rhetorical education should be read as heart-felt pomposity, rather than as self-conscious or offhand impression of such rhetoric, possibly crafted to placate, or to bait (or simply to cue, in a scripted exercise) the moralizing ramblings of his teacher Agamemnon. Similarly, we might read Eumolpus’ moralizing discourse in 88 as a cheap seduction (and take his line at 88.6–7, “we slander the past, and learn and

teach nothing but vices,” as the poet’s sardonic hint at his own perverted pedagogy). Similarly, the journey to Croton, during which the poet lectures and recites the *Bellum Civile*, is lived as a series of sketches (“why don’t we make up a farce?,” 117.4): Eumolpus acts as master (complete with fictional past), and the rest of the gang as slaves: in Encolpius’ narrative of dressing up and make-believe, why should the speech at 118 be read as guilelessly sincere? It is by no means obvious that Petronius’ characters (and narrator) are always naïve puppets rather than shrewd (self-satirizing) actors.

For Relihan, a Menippean *Satyricon* is fundamentally apolitical. For Bakhtin, however, a hostage to Stalin and a victim of exile and censorship, it is crucial that Menippean satire is a dissident genre, a foil to the classical status quo. Bakhtin understands carnival (of which the Menippea is a literary expression) as a vibrantly political symbol for dissent and revolution, a populist arena in which hierarchies can be fuddled, fears conquered and visionary hopes resuscitated. In this conception of carnival, laughter is the expression and catalyst for such renewal, and the emphasis is therefore put on a celebratory, subversive humor: us (the people, the revelers) laughing at, and in spite of, *them.*30 Yet the motivations behind and cultural potency of Bakhtin’s construction of Menippea are precisely historically situated,31 and thus he is not concerned with reading the *Satyricon* as a political text of its own time. Although Bakhtin sees ancient Menippean satire as a pre-Christian response of high empire to a collapse of ethical norms, clash of philosophical/religious movements and subsequent fragmentation of the self,32 his Menippean vision does not (want to) deal with a Neronian *Satyricon* likely written by Nero’s *arbiter elegantiae*, at the very heart of the imperial court, with a text that is as “classic” and institutional as it is anarchic or populist,33 or with a text that might be read as a pessimistic satire about oppression, entrapment, and decay, whose readers become anxious, jumpy courtiers waiting for the next man to react. Hence in “Forms of time and chronotype in the novel,” Bakhtin uses the widow of Ephesus tale (*Satyricon* 111–12) to illustrate the triumph of laughter and life over death and military authority, yet in order to conform to this preconceived formulation, the tale has to be edited out of its context

30 Bakhtin (1984) 10–11 contrasts carnivalesque parody and travesty with “the negative and formal parody of modern times,” which only denies without renewing.

31 See Holquist’s introduction to Bakhtin (1981), and Eagleton (1981), summarised in Vice (1997) 150–1: Eagleton argues (144) that Bakhtin pits against the “official, formalistic and logical authoritarianism,” whose unspoken name is Stalinism, “the explosive politics of the body, the erotic, the licentious and the semiotic.”


33 On Bakhtin’s nostalgic vision of an archaic, anarchic carnival, see Edwards (2001) and Emerson (2001).
in the Satyricon, which might complicate our reading or burst the utopian bubble.\textsuperscript{34} This is a text which tropes the theatricalization of public life in Neronian Rome, probably written by an erudite Neronian courtier forced to slice his own wrists at the whisper of incrimination. How carnivalesque (in Bakhtin’s terms) can such a fiction be, or risk being? Would a narrative told in the first person by an unreliable narrator, a fiction which thematizes dissimulation on every level, whose every position is potentially self-satirizing, be the \textit{only} means of composing satire under these circumstances? The Satyricon is only satire if you want it to be: Petronius, the distant and silent author, the discreet and savvy Arbiter, can always keep his hands clean.

**Ingredients from verse satire**

Many scholars have suggested that the title of Petronius’ work, \textit{Satyricon} or \textit{Satyrus}, leads us to expect ingredients from Roman verse satire, and this may be another angle from which we might view the text as “satiric.” That is, it is thought that the title puns both on satyrs and on \textit{satura}, the Latin word for satire, meaning literally a bubble and squawk mishmash (an image which also suits this polyphonic title and text). Satyrs were in any case connected with satire: Horace is an impotent satyr in \textit{Sermones} 2.1, where satire is spelt \textit{satira} (v. 1), and the satyric Priapus becomes satire’s semicivilized mascot in the manicured gardens of \textit{Sermones} 1.8.\textsuperscript{35} Although Courtney reasons that the adjective \textit{satiricus} only came to mean both satirical in the modern sense and “pertaining to a satyr” in late antiquity, and that therefore the Roman reader “would have known” not to connect the title with \textit{satura}, this logic seems to presume that puns, and reader imaginations, are activated only by correct etymologies.\textsuperscript{36} Van Rooy, meanwhile, rejects the pun on \textit{satura} on the grounds that Petronius’ text lacks the moral function of Varro’s Menippean satires, a potentially circular argument which, as we have seen, requires much unpacking.\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{34} For discussion of the tale in context, see Rimell (2002) ch. 8. Similarly, if the Cena is a Saturnalian feast, it is one which explores the extent to which carnival role-reversals and liberties may be illusory, paper thin, a licence to operate above the law (especially for the tyrant Trimalchio). The literary Saturnalia, in the Satyricon and Horace’s Sermones, is a zone where freedom is contested as much as feted – not a discourse possible within Bakhtin’s conception of carnival.

\textsuperscript{35} Although there was no direct connection between satire and satyr plays, Gowers suggests (1993a) 116 that the two forms share the element of the burlesque, and that “it could have been the confusion of the two words \textit{satura} and \textit{satyrus} that made satire develop along mocking and in our sense satirical lines.”

The question to which we keep returning is: how artificial, restrictive, or misleading is it to trawl the *Satyricon* for features belonging to a single genre, even (or especially) if, in the case of satire, we bear in mind that the genre itself is continually being reinvented? Our answers might partly depend on how significant a role verse satire can be seen to play, and on these terms, there is a lot to go on. Satiric landscapes, character-types and images abound in the *Satyricon*, from drinking dens, brothels, dining rooms and steam baths, street brawls and legacy hunting, literary theory and slangish banter, to misogynistic sketches of drunken, nymphomaniac women, grotesque human and gastronomic bodies spied inside and out, and epic heroes dumbed down and fleshed out (like *polyaenus* Encolpius, who forgets his antidote to Circe’s poison at *Satyricon* 128, or puny Giton, falling straight into Polyphemus’ clutches at 98). Roman satire’s ithyphallic mascot, Priapus, becomes Petronius’ avenging deity, standing in for Poseidon in his epic wrath, while in the *Cena*, the *Satyricon*’s Saturnalian interlude and possibly most “satiric” passage, the guests are served Priapic cakes (*Satyricon* 60), spiteful little pastries which spurt acrid liquor into salivating mouths (thus the territorial host gets his satiric retaliation in first).

Reminiscences of tones, patterns, tactics, and quips from Roman satire are also much in evidence: for instance, at *Satyricon* 5, Agamemnon composes a poem which he suggests is inspired by Lucilian improvisation (*schedium Lucilianae humilitatis*: “a rough and ready piece of Lucilian modesty”), and switches from scasons to hexameters in a move which matches Persius’ shift between his prologue and first satire. Eumolpus also plays on the naturalizing *sermo* (conversation) mode of Roman satire at *Satyricon* 83, posing himself a question (“Why are you so badly dressed then?” you ask”) so that the ensuing poem at 83.10 can appear to be incorporated into the dialogue with Encolpius. Eumolpus’ “here’s one I prepared earlier” recitation, the *Troiae Halosis*, which is applauded with a hail of stones at *Satyricon* 90, is just the kind of epic performance slandered in Persius’ and Juvenal’s opening satires. Eumolpus’ longest verse set-piece, the *Bellum Civile*, is written in hexameters, and could easily be construed as owing as much to satire as to (Virgilian, Ovidian, and Lucanian) epic: the poem concerns the moral decay of Rome, imagined as sewn in the grotesque bodies of its torpid, binge-eating citizens, while in the “moralizing” speech that precedes the

---

38 On the role of grotesque bodies in Roman satire, see Braund and Gold (1998). On the metaphorics of food in Roman satire, see Gowers (1993a).

39 Lucilius called his poetry a *schedium* (Paul. Fest. 335, 335M); cf. Apuleius, *De Deo Socratis* Pr. 1. See Sullivan (1968) 191–2 on ways in which Petronius may be alluding to or parodying Lucilian style here.
petronius, satire, and the novel

poem (118), Eumolpus echoes Horace, Sermones 1.4.40ff. in claiming that true poetry is not simply a matter of shaping thoughts into meter, but is the product of musical genius: yet unlike Horace, who claims (unconvincingly) to be writing harmless prose that just happens to scan, Eumolpus casts himself (whether sincerely or self-mockingly) as the talented bard heaven-sent to expose Horatian amateurs.

Much of Roman satire is concerned with, or set against, bungled, fantastical, and metaphorical feasts. We can tease out many parallel influences in Trimalchio’s Cena, from mime and New Comedy to Plato’s Symposium, as well as Varro’s Menippean banquets, Lucian’s Convivium, or Menippus’ lost Symposium. Yet vestiges of Horace’s cena Nasidieni also do much to mark the Satyricon’s relationship to Roman verse satire, while the sadistic host of the dinner party in Juvenal, Satire 5, who dines on peacock and foie gras while his client guests are fed putrefying scraps, might be also read as a tyrant in the Trimalchian mould. (In both dinners, the guests’ freedom is a sham: Petronius’ overstuffed guts and Juvenal’s starved bellies are two sides of the same coin.)

Horace’s Sermones 2.8, the final poem in his collection, reunites many of Horace’s star satiric characters at a remake of satire’s favourite metaliterary event. The satire is written in the voice of Horace’s poet friend Fundanius, who reports back on the evening. He tells of the dishes served, the seating plan, the host’s accompanying lectures, and describes how the ceiling collapsed on the prize main course in a dramatic “accident,” whereupon Nasidienus was forced to salvage the show with inspired “improvisation.” Yet the guests fled without tasting any of the newly fashioned dishes, “as if the banquet had been blighted by Canidia, whose breath is more deadly than an African snake’s” (v. 95).40 Petronius’ Cena trumps Horace’s mean, bad-breathed finale with a swollen culinary extravaganza in which the host pulls trick after trick for hours on end. Trimalchio has often been compared to the pretentious control-freak Nasidienus; Bodel suggests that we might also imagine Agamemnon playing the role of Maecenas, the cultivated guest, Encolpius and Ascytlos acting as uninvited shadows Vibidius and Servilius Balatro, and the freedman Homer as Horace’s Nomentanus. Encolpius, as narrator and participant, is a version of Fundanius, while Petronius, like Horace, is one step removed from his own satiric banquet.41 Trimalchio’s Cena also prompts more detailed flashbacks to Sermones 2.8: the calculated collapse of Nasidienus’ awning, followed by an “austere” contemplation of fortune, is paralleled by Satyricon 47, the coup de théâtre in which a slave boy “falls” against Trimalchio, who pretends to be injured, and pleads for

his life: the audience await the outcome with bated breath, but Trimalchio declares the boy liberated and composes an epigram on fortuna to mark the occasion (echoing the beginning of Balatro’s snooty speech at Sermones 2.8: “this is the law that governs life,” v. 65). At Satyricon 52.4, a servant drops a cup, inspiring a mini-drama in which the audience of guests pleads for the symposiarch’s leniency, whereas the trauma surrounding a smashed dish is only imagined by Balatro in Horace, Sermones 2.8.72. And at the end of Petronius’ dinner, Encolpius, Asylytos, and Giton flee, just as in Horace (fugimus S. 2.8.93, cf. Satyricon 78.8), but now they are running for their lives, having stuffed themselves to bursting point with the food Horace’s guests have only sniffed (however noxious one whiff might be).

Petronius’ overt reference to the staged accident and recovery of Horace, Sermones 2.8 has the effect of spotlighting the artifice of Trimalchio’s dramatics, which menace and enthrall his guests in equal measure. Yet in this politically loaded, Neronian text, such fictions of chance are replayed over and over, and take on a specially provocative bite. In Annals 14, Tacitus hams up what he documents as Nero’s packaging of sinister plots as tricks of fate, culminating in the scheme to murder his mother Agrippina by sending her out in a collapsible boat: nihil tam capax fortuitum quam mare, “nothing is so full of accidents as the sea,” he is said to have sneered (Annals 14.3). When she survives, Agrippina pointedly reassures Nero that she has escaped death eius fortuna, “by his good luck” (Annals 14.6). Petronius himself is said to have staged his suicide to look accidental (mors fortuitae similis, Annales 16.19). Readers of the Satyricon, then, have every reason to suspect that (some? all?) “naïve” statements made by characters in the text are manipulative, convenient, or even satirizing postures, that Petronius’ frivolous, loosely bound episodes may be artfully designed to give just the right impression of aimlessness. As Connors suggests, Petronius himself acts as Fortuna spinning out his fortuitous fictions. The satiric author apes, rivals (and unmasked) the tyrant who leaves nothing to chance.

The issue of Petronius’ engagement with satire is complex, therefore, not only because this fiction is an embroidered patchwork of influences, or because its first person narrator is frustratingly opaque, but also because “satire” itself has embodied so many colliding and often unexamined readings of the text. The Satyricon is a discomfiting fiction to try to work out: it cannot be said to yield an unequivocal message, moral or otherwise, and challenges


43 For further discussion see Rimell (2002) ch. 11.  

the security of precisely those literary categories it is said to juggle. The
debates surrounding Petronius and/as satire have tended to strive for clarity
by transforming what are fascinating questions into answers: I have tried not
to do this, as it seems to me the fastest way to close down what will always
be exciting and insoluble problems of reading. Clearly we can conclude that
the concept of Menippean satire provides one possible frame for reading
Petronius’ innovations, and we have seen that elements recognizable from
Roman verse satire feature throughout the text. But we might also add that
Roman satire has already exploited (and tutored us in) the trickiness of first
person narration, of which the *Satyricon* is a colossal, Neronian specimen.
The delegation of *all* authority to the dubious adolescent Encolpius (a tactic
perhaps inspired by Horace, as disengaged puppeteer in *Sermones* book 2)
fuels scope for an extended experiment in Neronian doublespeak, and spikes
this text with all the *potential*, at least, for a venomous satiric feast.

*Further reading*

To get a sense of how debate on the “Petronius and satire” question has taken shape
and Beck (1982), or consult overviews in Schmeling (1999) 28–32, and Connors
(1998) 6–8, 10–12. On Menippean satire, and the possible definition of Petronius
as Menippean, see Relihan (1993), Conte (1996) 140–70, Kirk’s introduction and
summary of criticism (1980) ch. 13, and Dronke (1994) ch. 1. Those interested in
Bakhtin’s conception of Menippea should read Bakhtin (1981, 1984), or see the con-
venient summaries of both books in Kirk (1980) 226–7. *Vice* (1997) is one of the
best introductions to Bakhtin, with clear, critical explication of major elements in
Bakhtinian thought, including carnival and dialogism. Branham (2001) is also rec-
ommended. Recent critical works proposing to read the *Satyricon* as a provocatively
Neronian text include Connors (1998) and Rimell (2002).