Petronius’ *Satyrica*: Women Crossing the Line

Description of Panel

This panel presents and analyzes the women of Petronius’ *Satyrica* as transgressors in cultural, social, sexual, and literary contexts, women who confound and confuse accepted boundaries of behavior and conduct as they challenge convention and raise questions about the society in which they live. Recent works on Petronius (e.g., Courtney 2001; Rimell 2002), as well as research in other areas (see specifics in the abstracts) have generated new ways of considering Petronius’ masterpiece, and it is hoped that the varied and thought-provoking approaches and conclusions presented here will stimulate further work and reflection on this fascinating composition.

The first paper, “Transgression and Triangulation: Petronius’ Women and Bisexual Men,” considers women who have sexual encounters, often aggressively, with men involved with other men, in a version of the “triangulation” that characterizes most of the relationships among the characters of the *Satyrica*. In the second paper, “Borders, Bodies, and Money in the *Satyrica*: Sex and Social Anxiety in the Early Roman Empire,” the author analyzes how the women (as well as the men) of the *Satyrica* blur the borders between their bodies, sex, and money, as they reflect the anxieties of the period over wealth, status, and the (ab)use of bodies to achieve these two goals. The third paper, “Resurrection Woman, or There and Back Again: Petronius’ Widow of Ephesus,” considers a different sort of boundary crossing, as the widow of Ephesus passes from life to (near) death to life again, and then transforms that crossing by achieving a new life out of death with her husband and marriage also. In the fourth paper, “A Tale of Two Circes: Inversion and Subversion in the *Satyrica*,” the author analyzes the method by which Petronius uses Homer’s tale of Odysseus’ encounter with the goddess Circe to create a different, all too human Circe in the *Satyrica* that serves not to enhance but rather to debase the protagonist and set the stage for even darker encounters further in the narrative. Finally, the fifth paper, “Petronius’ Women and *Fellini Satyricon*: Crossing from Artifact to Archetype,” traces and analyzes the manner by which Petronius’ female characters, particularly Oenothea, as ground-breaking as they are, are nonetheless transformed once again into archetypal figures that create a different yet equally provocative logic for *Fellini Satyricon*.

The organizers of this panel expect to generate stimulating questions and vigorous discussion around the varied topics and approaches that these papers represent on women who “cross the line.” They hope thereby to contribute significantly to the array of original thoughts and ideas that are sure to arise during this conference.

List of Works Cited:

Courtney, E, 2001. *A Companion to Petronius*. Oxford.

Rimell, V. 2002. *Petronius and the Anatomy of Fiction*. Cambridge.

Transgression and Triangulation: Petronius’ Women and Bisexual Men

In contrast to the Greek novel where sexual symmetry marks the relationship of the lovers *Satyrica*, as noted by E. Courtney (2001), features the “triangulation” of sexual relationships. Thus, whether the relationships are heterosexual (e.g. Widow of Ephesus--husband--soldier) or homosexual (Encolpius-Giton-Ascyltus), the presence of the third party often drives the dynamic of the erotic escapades. Adding a further level of complication to these triangles is male bisexuality because several of the female characters engage with a male involved in a same-sex relationship. Among these women are Fortunata, Scintilla, Quartilla, Tryphaena, Chrysis, and Circe. In a novel where the breakdown of sexual boundaries is so prominent (“gender dissonance,” to use M. Skinner’s term [Skinner. 2005]) the interaction of the heterosexual female with the bisexual male provides rich material for a discussion of male/female roles.

Among married women we see Fortunata and Scintilla for whom their husbands’ catamites are a source of wifely resentment. For other women, the homosexual component of the male is simply a given, and, interestingly, is no barrier to female aggressiveness toward the male. So Quartilla, whose own house is filled with eunuchs and *cinaedi*, displays attraction to Encolpius’ Giton but soon arranges for him to deflower Pannychis. Tryphaena also displays attraction to Giton, who is ever the androgyne and often assumes the role of the tragic and epic heroine. Despite their awareness of Encolpius’ obsession with his *deliciae*, both Circe and Chrysis demonstrate their attraction to him. Most remarkable, however, amid the many scenes of gender transgression and female aggression is the degradation of Encolpius’ manhood when he is penetrated at the hands of a woman (Oenothea). In sum, the theme of females who want males who want males represents a uniquely original treatment of gender on the part of Petronius.

List of Works Cited:

Courtney, E, 2001. *A Companion to Petronius*. Oxford.

Skinner, M. 2005. *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture*. Blackwell.

Borders, Bodies, and Money in the *Satyrica*:

Sex and Social Anxiety in the Early Roman Empire

In a seminal article, Fergus Millar (1981) situates the social and historical insights in Apuleius’ *Golden Ass* in the “solidly realistic background” that provides the setting for the “fantastic goings-on” of the novel. The social world of the *Satyrica* has no less vivid a backdrop, and it is possible to discern the “real” Roman world in the chaotic, erotic, and sometimes disturbing environment through which the text’s narrator, Encolpius, travels.

Two episodes in the surviving fragments of the *Satyrica* explore the relationship between sex, money, and anxiety. Encolpius encounters Fortunata, who provides a feminine counterpart to her husband Trimalchio: similarly garish, she had been a prostitute (*Sat*. 77) and is now obsessively consumed with her newfound wealth (*Sat*. 67). Later, Encolpius and Eumolpus meet an aging legacy hunter named Philomela, who shamelessly prostitutes her children to Eumolpus in the fervent hope of obtaining his (non-existent) fortune (*Sat*. 140). Strikingly, the appearances of both Fortunata and Philomela lead other characters to focus on their wealth: Trimalchio reminisces yet again to an audience already familiar with the story about the inheritance that made him wealthy (*Sat* 76), while Eumolpus turns his attention to composing his very strange will (*Sat*. 141).

In a text consumed with decadence and self-interest, these episodes sexualize the transfer of wealth. In a conflation and confusion of sex and money, while Fortunata’s body is eroticized, her marriage is a financial arrangement, as is evident by Trimalchio’s display of his wife’s jewelry (*Sat*. 67). Eumolpus’ will, which specifies that his heirs will be compelled to consume his flesh, illustrates the boundary dissolution among seduction, corporeality, and financial gain. This presentation of sexual relationships and their opportunistic financial dimensions resonates with the anxieties about the security of personal wealth which characterize this and other literature of this period (Damon. 1998).

List of Works Cited:

Damon, C. 1998. *The Mask of the Parasite: A Pathology of Roman Patronage*. Ann Arbor.

Millar, F. 1981. “The World of The *Golden Ass*.” *JRS* 71. 63-75

Resurrection Woman, or There and Back Again: Petronius's Widow of Ephesus

The central figure in the inset Milesian tale of the Widow of Ephesus (*Satyrica* 111-112), told by the poet Eumolpus to calm feelings and restore harmony on Lichas's ship, crosses a dizzying variety of boundaries (Conte. 1006; Slater. 1990). While the primary boundary she transgresses is that between life and death, she leads the way across many other categorical divides as well on her way to claiming speech, agency, and power over death by the narrative's end. This matron first appears as a spectacle of chastity so powerful that she draws women from other countries to gaze on her. She follows her deceased husband into the tomb, apparently planning to starve herself over his body. A single sentence then juxtaposes the mourning widow underground and the crucified bodies of criminals above, guarded by a soldier. Drawn by lights and groans, he crosses into the tomb and finds her. First persuading her maid back to life with food and drink, the soldier then joins her in winning over the widow also: no longer the bride of death, she celebrates a new wedding (*nuptias*) with the soldier behind the only now closed doors of the tomb. With the soldier below ground, the family of one crucified criminal seizes the chance to reclaim his body from the cross. Discovering his dereliction, the soldier plans suicide. For the first time in the narrative, the widow moves from virtuous silence to recorded speech: in a superb reversal of Stoic couple suicides, the widow invokes the gods to forbid such an end and arranges for her late husband's body to replace the missing one on the cross. The story ends with the populace that once admired the widow's chastity marveling at the new body on the cross. The internal audience's complicity endorses the widow's power to transcend boundaries.

List of Works Cited:

Conte, G.B. 1996. *The Hidden Author: An Interpretation of Petronius'* Satyricon.

Berkeley.

Slater, N. 1990. *Reading Petronius*. Baltimore, MD and London.

A Tale of Two Circes: Inversion and Subversion in the *Satyrica*

The *Satyrica* is, among other things, an anti-epic, with anti-heroes and other characters that not only cross the line between epic and its other, but also transgress many other literary and social conventions, mores, and boundaries (Rimell. 2002; Courtney. 2001; Connors. 1998; Slater. 1990). This paper analyzes how Petronius inverts and subverts the character of Circe in Homer’s *Odyssey*; as the only character whose name Petronius takes directly from Homer’s epic, he portrays his Circe as the opposite of her model in the *Odyssey*, just as Encolpius is the anti-hero to the *Odyssey*’s hero. Homer’s Circe (*Odys*. 10.212-541) is a goddess versed in magic, “the loveliest of all immortals” to Odysseus who, after releasing his men from her spell, remains with her for a year, his virility protected from her magic by Hermes. By contrast, Petronius’ Circe, like her namesake, “lovelier than any work of art,” is nonetheless an all too mortal woman attracted not to heroes but rather to “the lowest of the low” in Encolpius’ disguise as a slave (*Satyr*. 126). The episode in the *Satyrica* inverts the significance of the Homeric interlude, as Encolpius, unable to achieve an erection, cries out that he has been “bewitched,” rather than protected by, the gods. This encounter then becomes a prelude to even greater humiliation for Encolpius at the hands of Proselenus and Oenothea. Petronius thus employs his Circe not to elevate and enhance his protagonist, as Homer does, but rather to subversively amplify the opposite qualities in both Encolpius and the *Satyrica* in general. Just as his Circe abandons her epic namesake and irretrievably crosses a line into behavior unacceptable to a woman of her status (let alone a goddess), so, Petronius seems to be suggesting, has Rome in general under Nero become an inverted imitation of its former, nobler self.

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Connors, C. 1998. *Petronius the Poet: Verse and Literary Tradition in the Satyrison*.

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Courtney, E, 2001. *A Companion to Petronius*. Oxford.

Rimell, V. 2002. *Petronius and the Anatomy of Fiction*. Cambridge.

Slater, N. 1990. *Reading Petronius*. Baltimore, MD and London.

Petronius' Women and *Fellini Satyricon*: Crossing from Artifact to Archetype

One of the more extraordinary encounters with Petronius’ *Satyrica* and 20th century culture is Federico Fellini’s film, *Fellini Satyricon* (1969). Neither a staging nor an illustration of the ancient text, the film is a powerful vision of antiquity seen as, effectively, an alien planet—or rather, the *dream* of an alien planet. The film tears apart conventional visual styles that had created a popular niche for ―sword and sandal‖ films, and sought to avoid or explode the various clichés that had made the ancient world stale and all-too-familiar in the cinema, particularly in the era of Italian fascism.

The film was a liberating breakthrough for Fellini, who had been at an impasse in his career. One element in his creative liberation was his recourse to analytic psychology, upon which he had already relied while making *8 1/2*. His interest in archetypal images, I argue, helped him to shape the ending of the film, which, in spite of the disjointed nature of much of it, does have a definite narrative structure towards the end. After various adventures, the young Encolpio suffers a crisis of impotence, which ultimately must be cured by Enotea, a figure that fluctuates between haughty beauty and Earth Mother. Cured and newly remade after his ritual intercourse with Enotea, Encolpio seems ready to be freed for further adventures, when the film’s narrative tapers off.

This paper traces the evolution of Fellini’s deployment of ritualized and archetypical views of the feminine. Beginning with the Petronian fragments concerning Oenothea which inspired his plot, I trace the congeries of texts and themes that led to the final version of *Fellini Satyricon*.