

The Art of Travesty: Vergilian Cento as Petronian Invention at *Satyr.* 132.11

Petronius' *Satyrical* is a particularly complex piece of literature, not least because it is permeated throughout with literary concerns—hyperawareness of literary tropes, mangled interpretation of myths and pontification on literary aesthetics—that induce disorienting reverberations between the literature of Rome from outside the novel's pages and its reception within. Indeed, much of the humor in the work is born of inventive manipulation of well-known literature through the warped lens of Petronius' flawed characters.

One instance of Petronian literary invention through re-appropriation that warrants closer examination than it has yet received is a three-line cento from Vergilian sources that appears in the Croton episode of the *Satyrical*. The setting is characteristically base and humorous: Encolpius, the narrator and protagonist of the novel, recently humiliated by bouts of sexual impotence, has just berated his uncooperative penis for “dragging him to hell” with its misbehavior. The response of the offending member to this verbal barrage is described in Vergilian verses at 132.11: *illa solo fixos oculos aversa tenebat, / nec magis incepto vultum sermone movetur / quam lentae salices lassove papavera collo* (“turning away it held its eyes fixed on the ground, nor was its face moved more by the attempted speech than pliant willows or weak-stemmed poppies.”)

The first two lines of this passage are instantly recognizable as a word-for-word reproduction of Dido's rejection of Aeneas in the Underworld (*Aen.* 6.469-70), a sentence which concludes in the original with *quam si dura silex aut stet Marpesia cautes* (“...than if it were hard flint or a Marpessian cliff standing there”). As Courtney (2001, 198) notes, the proverbial hardness of the elements to which Dido is compared are not appropriate to the *mentula's* offensive flaccidity, and so the description concludes with two Vergilian examples of pliancy,

*lenta salix* (from *Eclogues* 3.83 and 5.16) and *lassove papavera collo*, drawn from the description of the death of young Euryalus at *Aen.* 9.436.

The clear incongruity between the Petronian narrative situation and the Aeneadic contexts (each serious, and particularly poignant and pathetic) has long been a source of critical discomfort, and understandably so. The startling (mis)application of epic pathos to a sordid plot point presents a literary travesty that can be understood only through the lens of the larger function of the *Satyrical*'s engagement with literature and literary production. The novel offers a glimpse at a world in which literary models are so ubiquitous and overworked that they become common and, far from existing as the sacrosanct province of the truly learned, they are available as referents for even the most vulgar purposes. There is, however, a glimpse of optimism that may be found in the interstices of this cento, and it is signaled by the two words within these lines that have received the least critical attention—*lenta salix*.

This paper presents a new interpretation of the significance of the cento by examining the two occurrences of the phrase *lenta salix* in Vergil. Interestingly, both of these appear in the *Eclogues* from the mouth of the same speaker (Menalcas), and in the same context—an expression of artistic admiration for the (absent) singer Amyntas during a singing contest modeled on Theocritus' *Idylls*. This analysis reveals that *lenta salix* is not simply a Vergilian phrase suited to the requirements of the narrative context (a paradigm of softness to replace the *dura silix* of the *Aeneid* passage), rather, it signals issues of literary competition, admiration, and succession as well as the juxtaposition of natural versus cultivated or artificial production. Amid the deadly Aeneadic references (the Underworld of Book 6 and the battlefield of Book 9), Petronius has carved out a fertile and productive pastoral nook, using the language (literally) of his august predecessor.

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