

Introducing Characters in Petronius' *Satyrica*

The extant text of Petronius' *Satyrica* includes a cast of memorable characters from Quartilla to Trimalchio's cook named "Carver." Some are fully fleshed out while others are merely encountered in passing. In presenting most of these characters, Petronius prefers to employ short introductions that may be categorized in descending order of occurrence by occupation, physical description, station in life, and nationality. I omit in this study the characters who receive rather lengthy introductions: Circe, Eumolpus, Trimalchio, Lichas, and a few guests at Trimalchio's dinner party, a few of whom are initially identified according to their couch positions or simply by name. The aim of this study is to elucidate Petronius' writing techniques in introducing characters and to interpret his possible reasons for employing particular introductions.

In the majority of cases, Petronius presents characters by succinctly stating their occupation. For example, we find in the episode of the stolen cloak (12.1-15.9) characters about whom little or nothing more is given than their professions: *cociones* (14.7) gather at the uproar created by both parties shouting "thief", *advocati nocturni* (15.2) arrive to demand that the cloak be deposited with them for "safe-keeping", and then *nescio quis ex cocionibus* (15.4) lays hold of the cloak (15.4) before both parties quickly exchange property and run off. Petronius highlights the occupation of these characters because their placement in the scene demands a particular livelihood, and the labeling solely by occupations reflects the rapidity of the incident. In addition, the abundant use of occupations to describe working class characters throughout this novel replicates a common practice in Roman society, where freedmen were often identified by their professions (See Andreau 2009, 118-19; Verboven 2009, 129).

Petronius' second most common introduction is a physical description, which both personalizes the character and often gives a trait that is significant to its context, e.g., Trimalchio's "pet" is described as *puer non inspeciosus* (74.8), which explains Trimalchio's attraction to the boy and his wife's jealousy of him. Furthermore, a good number of the physical descriptions seem to be derived from stock characters of Roman theatre. For instance, one of the *cociones* from the stolen cloak episode is described as *calvus, tuberosissimae frontis* (15.4), which resembles the bald-headed fool of the Roman mime (Panayotakis 1995: 29, 141). The effect of Petronius' brief description of the *cocio* is remarkable, as Panayotakis (1995, 29) interprets: "Combining the mimic features of baldness and the juridical characteristics of a *cocio*, the audience understands ... that the interventions by the *cociones* are nothing but false procedures in order to deceive and steal the valuable *pallium* (*Sat* 15.2, 15.5)."

Petronius often gives a character's age or station in life as a shorthand introduction. Quartilla's maid's presentation of herself to the trio as *ego sum ancilla Quartillae* (16.3) suggests she will play the theatrical role of "go-between maid" and establishes her credibility for what she knows of the past and future (see Panayotakis 1995, 37). Given the age or station in life of a character, the audience may infer the respect to be afforded this character and an expectation may be set up for fulfillment or disappointment. For example, it is an *eques Romanus* who comes to Ascyltus' rescue in the bath after his clothes have been stolen (92.10); our expectation of the nobility of this upper-class gentleman is deflated as the narrator informs us of his motives (92.10): ...*ac domum abduxit, credo, ut tam magna fortuna solus uteretur.*

Lastly, the only toponymic characters in *The Satyricon* are slaves. Trimalchio's

slaves enter the dining room described as *pueri Alexandrini* (31.3); *duo Aethiopes capillati* (34.4); *Aegyptius puer* (35.6); and *puer Alexandrinus* (68.3). Identifying slaves by their nationality was a common Roman practice (see, e.g., Plautus' characters: Messenio [*Men.*], Delphium [*Most.*], Phrygia and Eleusium [*Aul.*], and Phoenicium [*Ps.*]). The employment of nationality to these characters identifies them as slaves and also expands their character because Romans associated certain characteristics with both slaves and certain nationalities (See Cic. *Scaur.*XVIII.41-42; *Scaur.*XXII.45; *Lig.*IV.11).

In sum, Petronius employs a masterful economy of words in introducing the characters included in this study. He relies on common categories of people within Roman society (e.g., occupations indicate freedmen, nationalities point to slaves) and the audience's knowledge of both theatrical roles (such as the go-between maid) and stereotypes (e.g., slaves are lazy, idling, and untrustworthy [*Col.RR* 1.8.1-2]) to expand and to enrich the interpretations of scenes.

Bibliography

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