

Tarquinium invenisti: The Characterization of Ascyltos in Petronius' Satyricon

This paper analyzes the character of Ascyltos in Petronius' *Satyricon*. Although others have made passing remarks on his characterization (Conte 1997, Courtney 2001, Schmeling 2001), I have found no sustained analysis of the character of Ascyltos as he appears throughout Petronius' *Satyricon*. The unique nature of the *Satyricon's* narrator appears to be one reason that scholars have neglected sustained character studies. Every scene in which Ascyltos appears and every act which Ascyltos performs, through which we may begin to sketch out his character, is presented by our narrating Encolpius. Compounding the difficulties of this presentation is the presence of two Encolpii (Beck 1973): there exists the autodiegetic Encolpius who is a character existing within and describing the events of the text and there is the extradiegetic Encolpius who is the Encolpius reminiscing on the events of the text. Any analysis we make of Ascyltos' character must be understood as an analysis of Encolpius' opinion (whether this is autodiegetic or extradiegetic) of Ascyltos as we have no scenes which claim to be objective descriptions of Ascyltos. In fact, every scene in which Ascyltos appears is a subjective description of Ascyltos made by someone close to him.

Ultimately, Encolpius' presentation of Ascyltos appears comparable to our modern term asshole. Although this term has near equivalents in other languages such as the Spanish *pendejo* (pubic hair), the Italian *stronzo* (turd) and especially the German *arschloch* (asshole) (Nunberg 2012), my paper will focus on the modern American use. Aaron James (2012), dealing primarily with modern examples, has defined the characterization of an asshole along three basic parameters of behavior: "1. [he] allows himself to enjoy special advantages and does so systematically; 2. does this out of an entrenched sense of entitlement; and 3. is immunized by his sense of entitlement against the complaints of other people." This threefold parameter is, as

James points out, quite subjective. To call someone an asshole is to profess one's own subjective opinion concerning the characteristics of another. This restriction is not at issue with the *Satyricon* as it presents only Encolpius' subjective characterizations. I will argue that Encolpius represents Ascyltos as one who consistently transgresses interpersonal boundaries as they are established in the *Satyricon* and as a character who appears to do this out of a sense of entitlement, while exhibiting complete disregard for the other characters in the text.

This behavior is exhibited in a number of places, but I will focus on the following three instances. In section 9, Ascyltos attempts to rape Giton while mocking Giton's urgent complaints with an aggressive joke: *gladium strinxit et 'si Lucretia es' inquit 'Tarquinius invenisti.'* Later, Ascyltos bombastically mocks Encolpius and Giton's lovemaking, loudly drawing attention to his invasion of their privacy and his disregard for this social boundary: *risu itaque plausuque cellulam implevit* (11). During the *Cena Trimalchionis*, Ascyltos laughs at the elaborateness of Trimalchio's banquet and continues his laughter even after chastisement from other guests (57). I intend to argue that one common element in these instances is Ascyltos' habit of doing something he is not supposed to do while simultaneously drawing attention to his behavior and exhibiting a complete lack of concern with other characters. Furthermore, I will argue that the connection of Ascyltos' name to the Greek adjective *askultos* (Priuli 1975) also contributes to his characterization as an asshole.

Ascyltos consistently takes special privileges in his interactions with other characters in the *Satyricon* by transgressing interpersonal standards of behavior as they are represented in the text. While enjoying this privilege, Ascyltos also appears undeterred by any protest from the other characters in the text, casting him as a Roman equivalent for our modern term, asshole.

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