

# PETRONIUS A HANDBOOK

EDITED BY JONATHAN PRAG & IAN REPATH



 WILEY-BLACKWELL

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# Petronius

A Handbook

*Edited by Jonathan Prag and Ian Repath*

 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

This paperback edition first published 2013

© 2013 Blackwell Publishing Ltd

Edition history: Blackwell Publishing Ltd (hardback, 2009)

Blackwell Publishing was acquired by John Wiley & Sons in February 2007. Blackwell's publishing program has been merged with Wiley's global Scientific, Technical, and Medical business to form Wiley-Blackwell.

*Registered Office*

John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate,  
Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA  
9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK  
The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19  
8SQ, UK

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*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Petronius : a handbook / edited by Jonathan Prag and Ian Repath.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and indexes.

ISBN 978-1-4051-5687-5 (hardcover : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-1-118-45137-3 (pbk.: alk. paper)

1. Petronius Arbiter--Criticism and interpretation. 2. Satire, Latin--History and criticism.

I. Prag, J. R. W. II. Repath, Ian.

PA6561.P37 2009

873'.01-dc22

2008028318

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Cover image: Eleanor Antin, *The Death of Petronius* from *The Last Days of Pompeii*, 2001, chromogenic print, 469/16 × 941/2 × 13/4 inches (framed). Copyright © Eleanor Antin.

Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

Cover design by Richard Boxall Design Associates

For Ewen Bowie  
*magistro optimo et ingenti flumine litterarum inundato*

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2007) and “Sizing up Rome or Theorising the Overview,” in D. Larmour and D. Spencer (eds), *The Sites of Rome* (Oxford 2007). Her interest in the *Satyricon* stems from several years of teaching it at the University of Nottingham.

# Preface and Acknowledgments

The idea for this book was born over a couple of pints of beer in a pub in Nottingham. While chatting about teaching and related matters we came to realize that one of us, Jonathan, was using the *Satyricon* as part of a course on ancient society and economy at the University of Leicester while the other, Ian, was teaching a literary course on the ancient novel at the University of Nottingham. It seemed a good thing that a text could be used in such different ways, but also a shame that such different approaches are often-segregated. We decided, therefore, to propose a volume in which we would invite leading scholars to write chapters on a range of topics, a range both broad and mutually complementary, all focusing on the one text: Petronius's *Satyricon*. That our contributors were so eager to help seemed to suggest we had struck a chord, and we hope that this book will be valuable for all those with an interest in this novel and its influence.

We gratefully acknowledge the generosity of Eleanor Antin and of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, for their willingness to let us use the image reproduced on the cover; Merton College, Oxford, for financial assistance with other illustrations; and Paul Dilley for translating the chapter by Jean Andrieu.

We are indebted to Al Bertrand and his colleagues at Wiley-Blackwell for being so receptive to the idea in the first place and so helpful throughout the editorial process. We are no less grateful to the contributors, who have been both prompt and patient – editing a volume by multiple academics can, in the unforgettable words of one of our

contributors, be rather like herding cats – but happily not on this occasion!

# Abbreviations

All references to chapters of the *Satyrica* are prefaced with a §. Although the division into chapters is almost certainly later than Petronius himself (and the numbering sequence in use today certainly is), they have been universally adopted, are now printed in all texts and most translations, and are the standard form of reference.

References to all other ancient authors and their works follow the standard abbreviations listed in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (third, revised edition 2003, edited by S. Hornblower and A. Spawforth, Oxford University Press), at pp. xxix–liv.

Other abbreviations used in this volume are:

*CIL* = *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum, consilio et auctoritate Academiae litterarum regiae Borussicae editum*. Berlin. 1863–. The standard collection of Latin inscriptions, arranged in multiple volumes, organized primarily on a geographical basis (for example, vol. 6 is the city of Rome, vol. 10 is central and southern Italy, Sicily, and Sardinia). Production of the series is ongoing.

*LGPN* = *Lexicon of Greek Personal Names*, edited by P. M. Fraser and E. Matthews, I (Oxford, 1987); II (M. J. Osborne and S. G. Byrne eds; Oxford, 1994); III.A (Oxford, 1997); III.B (Oxford, 2000); IV (Oxford, 2005). See the website: [www.lgpn.ox.ac.uk](http://www.lgpn.ox.ac.uk)

*P.Oxy.* = *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, edited with translations and notes by B. P. Grenfell and A. S. Hunt et al. London. 1898–.

# Introduction

*Jonathan Prag and Ian Repath*

## About this Book

Petronius's fragmentary novel, the *Satyricon*, is a text as amazing as it is puzzling. It combines startling originality, outrageous and raunchy humor, literary genius, and brilliant characterization. It provides an insight into the seedier side of life in the ancient world and an unusual perspective on first-century municipal Roman Italy and beyond. It has a unique place in the history of literature as the first substantial novelistic text and has been enormously influential on writers of fiction and on those trying to understand ancient Rome. Its attractiveness as a text to be read, studied, and researched, whatever one's interest, has long been clear, and, as is evident from the bibliography to this volume, there is no shortage of material written on it. What, then, does this book aim to achieve?

In this volume there are a dozen especially commissioned, original essays by leading scholars in the fields of the ancient novel and of the culture and history of the early Roman Empire. These essays have Petronius's *Satyricon* as their sole focus and students as their primary audience, although we are confident that anyone interested in this text will find much that is useful and illuminating. The essays each present a survey of one aspect of the *Satyricon* taking into account the vast amount of scholarship, both specialized and general, and, in a "Further Reading" section, point the reader towards other works on the particular topic. (Works are referred to by author and date, and full details can be found in the comprehensive bibliography towards the

back of this book.) The aim is not a synthesis of material so that you do not have to read anything else; rather, the essays act as introductory pieces to provoke thought and guide you on your way. They enable you to gain a valuable insight by themselves, but they can also form the basis of in-depth research. However, they will be much more valuable if you read the text of the *Satyricon* first. This book cannot be, and is certainly not intended to be, a substitute for reading the text itself: it is a handbook to it, a help in interpreting it and making sense of it. In addition, we hope that this volume will prove invaluable for not only students, but also those who are lucky enough to teach this text, whether exclusively or as part of a broader course.

The rich variety of Petronius's *Satyricon* means that there are many angles from which it can be approached, and we have tried to reflect this range. You might be interested in Latin literature, for instance, or Roman art, or the Roman economy, or Classics in the cinema: whichever aspect of the ancient world you find most appealing there is something for you in the *Satyricon* and its influences, and there is something for you here. However, one of the main problems when approaching the *Satyricon* is the frequently sharp divide between literary and historical studies; this volume seeks to challenge and overcome that division. A full understanding of a text involves an appreciation of all its aspects, and, although the essays are free-standing and may be read independently and in any order, in the course of their different approaches they often provide complementary readings of the same passages; cross-references will usually alert you to this. We think that this multi-dimensional approach is essential to studying the ancient world, and that Petronius's *Satyricon* is one of the best texts that survive with which one can attempt an integrated interpretation of one snapshot of ancient life. It can be read as a literary text, as a social document, or as

evidence for historical reality, but none of these readings can properly exist without the others. Our advice, then, whether you are an ancient historian whose focus is funerary monuments or a literature student who is keen to see what Petronius does with the literary heritage of the ancient Greeks, is the following: read the other approaches presented here, since they are not long and you should soon enough get an idea of what they are about and, more importantly, you may well find your understanding and appreciation deepened by alternative perspectives. Having said all that, and although the chapter titles should make it clear enough, a brief summary of how the volume fits together now follows.

In the next section of the Introduction we will briefly consider the questions of who Petronius might have been, and when we might date the text. This is followed by a short outline of the *Satyricon*, a glossary of the main characters' names, some initial suggestions for background reading, and a map of Italy. Then, in the first of the chapters, we start by looking at what kind of text the *Satyricon* is and the state in which it has come down to us, asking questions about its fragmentary nature, its genre, its narrator, how its narrative functions, the use of poetry as well as prose, and whether there might have been an overall narrative thread: in short, the fundamentals for being able to read the text (Slater, *READING THE SATYRICON*). We move on to look at how the *Satyricon* relates to other literature, since, for a Roman writer, and reader, how one reacts to both Greek (Morgan, *PETRONIUS AND GREEK LITERATURE*) and Roman (Panayotakis, *PETRONIUS AND THE ROMAN LITERARY TRADITION*) texts is a crucial part of the literary process and can tell us a great deal about what kind of text we are dealing with and what its author is up to. The *Satyricon* is a densely literary and allusive work, and an understanding of how it relates and reacts to other literature is essential to a

full appreciation of the text. Next comes a chapter on the extraordinary language of the *Satyrica* and the interplay that takes place in the narrative between sound-effects and metaphors; in addition, the *Satyrica* not only alludes verbally to other texts, but it also demands in its use of repeated vocabulary that the reader have a keen eye and ear for detail (Rimell, LETTING THE PAGE RUN ON).

The extent to which “literature” is part of culture and society will already be apparent from these first few chapters; literary effects do not exist in isolation either from literary traditions, or from the wider world of language and the senses. The next two chapters consider aspects of the society within which the *Satyrica* belongs: the fascinating problems of gender and sexual practice in a society that is ultimately very different from our own, and the ways in which this is presented in the *Satyrica* (Richlin, SEX IN THE SATYRICA); and the no less intriguing problems raised by deciding which socio-cultural context we should put the *Satyrica* into in the first place – in this book, as in most studies of Petronius, into the world of Nero (Vout, THE SATYRICA AND NERONIAN CULTURE).

We continue the exploration of the social and historical context of the *Satyrica* with four chapters which increasingly focus upon the historical, and material, world of the *Satyrica*. The first of these (Andreau, FREEDMEN IN THE SATYRICA) begins with the important question of how we can use such a text to write “history” before going on to examine what we can learn about the social class of the “freedmen” in first-century AD Italy, whose central role in Roman life is reflected by their prominence in the *Satyrica*, and in particular in the *Cena Trimalchionis*, “Trimalchio’s Dinner Party.” This is followed by a study of the *Satyrica* as a source for what might loosely be called economic history (Verboven, A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON MY WAY TO THE MARKET), but which, as the chapter reveals, is a much



bigger topic than the word “economic” suggests, and one for which, again, the *Satyricon* provides both important and unusual evidence to place alongside what we know from elsewhere. Two further chapters develop this particular approach, examining the ways in which comparison between the archaeology of the Roman world and the text of the *Satyricon* can illuminate our reading of the text, but also give us invaluable perspectives on the surviving evidence from other sources. In the first of these (Hope, AT HOME WITH THE DEAD) we consider the unique and unusual light which the *Satyricon* casts upon the subjects of death and burial, and on contemporary attitudes to them, comparing this with the rich material evidence that survives from the Roman world. In the second (Hales, FREEDMEN’S CRIBS), we confront the question of domestic space and the nature and use of the house and its decoration – something which, again, the *Satyricon* presents differently from any other source.

To bring the discussion up to the present day, we conclude with a pair of chapters on the more recent reception of what remains of the *Satyricon* in two distinct media – novelistic fiction and film. The first (Harrison, PETRONIUS’S *SATYRICON* AND THE NOVEL IN ENGLISH) examines the use and impact of our surviving text, and in particular of the *Cena Trimalchionis* – something which can be traced from literary works of the eighteenth century through to the most recent works of fiction. The second (Paul, FELLINI-SATYRICON) discusses the famous and challenging film by the Italian director Federico Fellini, inspired in diverse ways by both the content and the nature of Petronius’s text. The volume concludes with a bibliography for all the contributions, an index of ancient passages cited in the text, and a general index.

Before taking a brief look at who Petronius might have been, two general points:

1 This is a handbook to Petronius's *Satyricon*, but you will see from the bibliography and further reading sections that the novel has frequently been referred to as the *Satyricon*. For an explanation of the difference and the argument that *Satyricon* was the original title, see Slater, *READING THE SATYRICON* (p. 20). Throughout this book we use the form *Satyricon*, since that is now the commonly agreed title: we hope that any confusion is minimal (and in any case, the difference is rather less confusing than between the two received titles of Apuleius's novel: *The Metamorphoses* and *The Golden Ass*!).

2 All Latin in this volume is translated, and translations are generally the contributor's own, unless stated otherwise. However, depending on the nature of the topic being covered, the Latin is often quoted or referred to, since the *Satyricon* is a Latin text, and a text can never be fully divorced from its original language.

## Who Was Petronius?

Among the questions that can be crucial for understanding and interpreting a text we might single out four particular ones in this instance:

- 1 Who was the author?
- 2 Where did they live?
- 3 What was their social status?
- 4 When did they write?

Such questions may seem obvious if we want to use the text as a source for historical information, but they are no less relevant when trying to locate a text in its literary context. In the case of Petronius the answer is unfortunately not a simple one. If we could answer the question of his identity with confidence then the rest would of course follow; but, for the very reason that we cannot be entirely sure of the

identification of the author, it remains possible to dispute the other questions also, and in particular that of when he wrote. Much the fullest discussion of this problem is to be found in Rose (1971), with shorter summaries in, for example, Walsh (1970: 67-8, 244-7).

The basic elements of the problem are these:

1 The majority of our (mediaeval) manuscripts containing the text of the *Satyricon*, and later writers also, identify the author simply by the name (*nomen*) of "Petronius."

2 However, some manuscripts, and several later writers, refer to the author as *arbiter*, or even as "Petronius Arbiter."

3 The Roman historian Tacitus, in his *Annales* (16.18-19), provides a lengthy obituary notice of an individual of consular status called Petronius who was forced to commit suicide in AD 66 by the Emperor Nero (emperor from AD 54 to 68). It is worth reproducing this notice in full:

Petronius deserves a brief obituary. He spent his days sleeping, his nights working and enjoying himself. Others achieve fame by energy, Petronius by laziness. Yet he was not, like others who waste their resources, regarded as dissipated or extravagant, but as a refined voluptuary. People liked the apparent freshness of his unconventional and unselfconscious sayings and doings. Nevertheless, as governor of Bithynia and later as consul, he had displayed a capacity for business. Then, reverting to a vicious or ostensibly vicious way of life, he had been admitted into the small circle of Nero's intimates, as Arbiter of Taste (*elegantiae arbiter*): to the blasé Emperor nothing was smart and elegant unless Petronius had given it his approval. So Tigellinus, loathing him as a rival and a more expert hedonist, denounced him on the grounds of his

friendship with Flavius Scaevinus. This appealed to the Emperor's outstanding passion – his cruelty. A slave was bribed to incriminate Petronius. No defence was heard. Indeed, most of his household were under arrest.

The Emperor happened to be in Campania. Petronius too had reached Cumae; and there he was arrested. Delay, with its hopes and fears, he refused to endure. He severed his own veins. Then, having them bound up again when the fancy took him, he talked with his friends – but not seriously, or so as to gain a name for fortitude. And he listened to them reciting, not-discourses about the immortality of the soul or philosophy, but light lyrics and frivolous poems. Some slaves received presents – others beatings. He appeared at dinner, and dozed, so that his death, even if compulsory, might look natural. Even his will deviated from the routine death-bed flatteries of Nero, Tigellinus, and other leaders. Petronius wrote out a list of Nero's sensualities – giving names of each male and female bed-fellow and details of every lubricious novelty – and sent it under seal to Nero. Then Petronius broke his signet-ring, to prevent its subsequent employment to incriminate others. (Trans. M. Grant.)

Because Tacitus describes Petronius's position at Nero's court as *elegantiae arbiter*, "Arbiter of Taste," many scholars from the sixteenth century onwards have been tempted to identify the Petronius described here by Tacitus with the author of the *Satyricon*. This is the most likely source of the use of the term "Arbiter" in some later writers mentioned in Point 2 above. It will doubtless be apparent that the description of Petronius's character provided by Tacitus would seem to fit the author of the *Satyricon* extremely well – although the suggestion which is sometimes made, that the *Satyricon* is the same

document as Petronius's list of Nero's debaucheries mentioned here by Tacitus, is surely going too far.

4 In the manuscripts of Tacitus, the consular Petronius appears either without a first name (*praenomen*), as at *Ann.* 16.17.1, or else with the initial C., short for Gaius, as at *Ann.* 16.18.1.

5 Both Plutarch and Pliny the Elder make brief references to an individual called T. (= Titus) Petronius, and the way in which they describe him makes it very likely that he is the same man as that described by Tacitus, despite the different *praenomen* in the manuscript tradition:

When the ex-consul T. Petronius was facing death, he broke, to spite Nero, a myrrhine dipper that had cost him 300,000 sesterces, thereby depriving the Emperor's dining-room table of this legacy. Nero, however, as was proper for an emperor, outdid everyone by paying 1,000,000 sesterces for a single bowl. That one who was acclaimed as a victorious general and as Father of his Country should have paid so much in order to drink is a detail that we must formally record. (Pliny, *Historia Naturalis* 37.20, trans. D. E. Eichholz.)

But we come now to matters that are a serious problem, and do great damage to the foolish, when the flatterer's accusations are directed against emotions and weaknesses the contrary to those that a person really has. [...] Or again, on the other hand, they will reproach profligate and lavish spenders with meanness and sordidness, as Titus Petronius did with Nero. (Plutarch, *Moralia* 60D, trans. F. C. Babbitt.)

6 A number of families – as many as six – are known to us with the family name (*nomen*) "Petronius," of which several members reached the consulship in the period of the early Empire.

7 No other individual called Petronius is known to have had the surname (*cognomen*) Arbiter; indeed, study of Roman funerary inscriptions in particular makes it seem very unlikely that anybody used this as an official *cognomen* (almost no examples are known, and none among the elite).

8 At least three individuals called Petronius are known to have held consulships specifically during Nero's reign. One of these, suffect consul in AD 62, has frequently been identified as T. Petronius Niger in past scholarship (including the hardback edition of this book) and consequently has often been equated with the man mentioned by Pliny and Plutarch (point 5 above) and with the man described by Tacitus (points 3-4 above) assuming correction of the *praenomen* from Gaius to Titus. However, epigraphic evidence makes it certain that the suffect consul of AD 62 was called P. Petronius Niger, and so the equation with T. (or C.) Petronius, nicknamed 'Arbiter', now looks arbitrary and very hard to justify. Similar objections arise to identifying T./C. Petronius 'Arbiter' with either of the other known consuls of Nero's reign called Petronius (A. Petronius Lurco, suffect consul in AD 58; P. Petronius Turpilianus, consul in AD 61). However, there are gaps in the lists of known consuls for each of the years AD 54, 56, 60, and 61, into which it would be theoretically possible to insert the consulship of T./C. Petronius 'Arbiter'. See further Völker and Rohmann 2011.

With all of the above taken into consideration, most scholars are prepared to accept the identification of the author Petronius ('Arbiter') with the Petronius described in Tacitus (and Pliny and Plutarch), even if the further identification of that Petronius with a specific consul in the reign of Nero remains an open question. It should, nonetheless, be emphasized that the identification is not