

Encolpius Tyrannus: Reflections on the First Person Narrator of the *Satyrica*

Political readings can be overdone – except in the case of ancient Rome, where the writers whose work survives tended to move in the highest circles of power. Given the vast erudition displayed by the author of the *Satyrica*, we may reasonably assume his proximity to the elite of the Neronian or Flavian period (Vout). This paper considers the first person narrative structure of the *Satyrica* and the character of the narrator himself as literary responses to aristocratic life under an emperor.

First, I explore how Encolpius' political, sexual, legal, economic and even geographic marginality connect him to earlier poetic first person narrators like Catullus' Attis and Ovid's Ariadne. Marilyn Skinner and others have well explored how late republican and Augustan poets momentarily assume such marginal subject positions in part to express political alienation under increasingly autocratic political regimes. Although the *Satyrica* is largely prose and occupies a facsimile of contemporary Italy, as opposed to mythic pasts, the distance between the world of the characters and that of their author and intended audience is nevertheless broad. As far as we can tell, the surviving text contains no freeborn Roman males, let alone aristocrats, and only female characters even have Latin names. For the reader to have Encolpius speak in the first person in his head is to assume about as liminal a perspective as possible. Whether the choice of content and tone reflects a conscious desire not to compete with an emperor with literary aspirations (Perry), or serves as an exploration of an alternative subject position, this degree of alienation in the text may be a product of life under or in the wake of a capricious emperor.

Encolpius differs importantly from Ariadne and Attis, however, in the lack of sympathy with which he is portrayed, and in the striking and insistent gap between this first person narrator and the author illuminated by Gian Biagio in *The Hidden Author*. Conte persuasively describes

Encolpius as ‘mythomaniacal,’ that is, in the habit of interpreting the events of his life using heroic and tragic paradigms from high literature. For a debased possibly former slave lacking social, economic or moral resources to be so provides raw material for smart comedy. Conte plots out how the narrative continuously moves up into epic and tragic tone and speech only to plummet into the realia of base fears and appetites. Such events are funny, but they also distance the author from the naive Encolpius – the author shapes the plot around the narrator to smash his illusions against material reality. The reader who perceives the literary allusions and Encolpius’ utter inability to live up to them shares the author’s point of view and laughs at the narrator with him.

Of course the most ‘mythomaniacal’ person of the mid to late first century CE was the emperor Nero, a self-styled musician and actor who performed tragedies and composed epics. Other scholars have sought satirical treatment of the emperor in the text. Trimalchio is the most common candidate, the tyrant of the *Cena* who exhibits many detailed similarities to the last of the Julio-Claudians, although Trimalchio’s pathetic imitation of the emperor may instead be a facet of the character meant to amuse Nero (Rose). Others point to Eumolpus, the self-described poet quite deceived about the quality of his work (Vout). I advance yet another candidate, the real tyrant of our text as its first person narrator. We as readers are forced to see the world through Encolpius’ eyes, and thus through his grand illusions, even if they are demonstrated to be such. The *Satyrical* is by far the longest sustained first person narrative to survive from the Greco-Roman world. The text traps us within the perspective of the mythomaniac, the unreliable narrator who capriciously rules our experience of this strange world.

Bibliography

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