

## Encolpius the Theater Critic: Superficiality and Hypocrisy in the *Cena Trimalchionis*

Encolpius, the *Cena*'s strikingly silent, uninvited guest, has strong feelings about what constitutes proper theater, but never gives voice to any of them in front of his host or fellow diners. Instead our narrator, an older and wiser Encolpius, drops frequent hints regarding his younger self's reactions to the entertainment he sees and hears. This paper is concerned with our hero's internal reactions to the performances of *pantomimi* (31.6-7), *mimi* (35.6), *Homeristae* (59.3), and singing generally (70.7). It was Beck (1975) who first noticed that Encolpius' criticism of musical and theatrical entertainment in the *Cena* generally was of a predominately aesthetic nature. In that vein, I demonstrate Encolpius' tendency to censure the superficial and subjective—e.g., shrillness or faulty voice modulation—but failure to censure vulgarity or inaccuracy of *content*, or to recognize his own participation in it. Yet Encolpius wants to position himself as an authority. As Conte (1995) has shown, the narrator desires to elevate his own experiences to the level of the heroes of high literature. Thus I argue that the free- but low-born Encolpius, who fancies himself a representative of the Roman literary elite, ultimately proves a superficial and therefore inadequate critic.

Habinek (2005), Horsfall (1996, 2003), and Panayotakis (1995) have provided insight into the role social class played in one's consumption and opinion of Rome's performance arts. In the case of mime and similar forms, there seems to have been complex interplay wherein elite Romans both willingly partook of the entertainment and also tended to deride it. The smug and *non-elite* Encolpius certainly derides much of what he hears at the *Cena*: he variously describes performers as *acidus* ("shrill," 31.6), and their voices as *taeterrima* ("extremely irritating," 35.6, 70.7), *canora* ("sing-song" [Walsh], 59.3), and *tremula* ("quavering," "screeching," 70.7). Through intertextual analysis of these passages, I show that the nature and language of these

criticisms find parallels in the negative descriptors of speech found in works of high literature. *Tremulus* (70.7), for instance, appears in Vergil in reference to the offensive screeching of frenzied women (*Aen.* 7.394-5) and in Horace in reference to the singing of an ugly old woman (*Carm.* 4.13.9-12). Encolpius' apparent attempts to align his own perspective with such great literary figures falter because our protagonist consistently fails to expand his criticism beyond the technical elements of vocal delivery. For example, when Trimalchio spouts countless factual errors in his "sing-song" commentary of the performance of the *Homeristae* (59.3), Encolpius never gainsays or mocks him for it—silently or otherwise. In addition, Encolpius' eager participation in mimic shenanigans elsewhere in the *Satyrica*—e.g., the melodramatic mock-suicide with a prop razorblade aboard Lychas' ship (108), a scene steeped in the physical and verbal language of the stage—further undermines his assumed position of authority. In reality, try as he might to appear above it all, Encolpius is little more than a fellow performer himself who can only in all fairness object to the *technique* of his fellow actors, not their profession.

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