

## Ritual Power and Male Impotence: Quartilla's Rites in Petronius' *Satyrica*

Powerful female characters form the fabric of both Greek and Latin literature, even if their presence is largely dictated by the needs of narratives which are driven forward by men. An examination of the representation of women's rituals in Latin texts is a fruitful avenue which allows us to explore the complex and contested place of women both in Roman literature and society. Such an examination reveals that women as performers of religious activity become visible and powerful and often articulate a point of view which runs opposite to that of the men. This paper offers a case study of female ritual activity as enabling female power. In Petronius' *Satyrica*, Quartilla's religious identity as a priestess of the phallic god Priapus is a vehicle through which the voracious female sexual appetite is given free rein and threatens the integrity of male sexuality and identity.

As a priestess of Priapus in Cumae, Quartilla has been identified as a parody of *Aeneid's* Sibyl (Walsh 1970, Connors 1998). Scholars have noted the links between theatrical performance and the episode's sexual content (e.g. Slater 1990, Courtney 2001, Panayotakis 1994) but the ritual framework of the *pervigilium Priapi* within which the episode unfolds has not been examined. I argue that Quartilla's religious identity is an empowering force, enabling and abetting the destruction of male sexual agency and potency. Despite the fragmentary nature of the episode, ritualistic elements abound and attest to the importance of the Priapic religious framework for its satirical impact.

The episode begins with Quartilla's servant addressing Encolpius and his companions by employing language properly belonging to the realm of ritual (*ecce ipsa venit*: *ecce* is often used to denote divine epiphany, cf. *Aeneid* 6.46; *nolite perturbari*, 16) and ends with a *hieros gamos* between Pannychis and Giton. Quartilla's identity as a priestess of Priapus enables her to take

Priapic vengeance on Encolpius and his company, who intruded into the gods' secret rites. Priapus' symbolic penetration by Encolpius is reflected in Quartilla's initial representation as a helpless woman, which is conveyed in ritual terms as a supplication. Other important elements that intensify the ritual framework of the narrative are: the priestess' special relationship with the god, who appears to her in dreams; the employment of the word *cella* (25) to describe the room where the *pervigilium* takes place, a term which could also refer to a temple; the cymbals Quartilla's female musicians employ at the banquet, typically used in Bacchus' and Cybele's rites. The distorted wedding ceremony between Giton and Pannychis with its mockery of ritual protocol forms an apt ending to the ritual context of the *pervigilium*.

Quartilla, cast as a ritual agent of the phallic god, is thus rendered capable of repeatedly causing the sexual penetration of the men during the *pervigilium*. Yet, as other scholars have noted, the penetrators are women, a *cinaedus*, and possibly a eunuch, all unlikely Priapic agents (Slater 1990, 42). The female or feminized figures thus assume the male role of the sexual aggressor and penetrator of the male heroes. In turn, Encolpius and Ascyltos are feminized, robbed of their capacity to operate as sexual agents and thus of the constitutive performance of their male identity. The paper ends by suggesting a link between this comic sexual reversal and the problem of maintaining the integrity of the self in the socio-political milieu of the Neronian era.

#### Works Cited

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