

FISH IMAGERY IN PETRONIUS' *SATYRICA*: *PISCICVLI* AND 'THE EMPEROR'?¹

In our first fragment of the extant *Satyrica* (1–5), Encolpius and Agamemnon are fervently engaged in a conversation on the status of rhetorical education, poetry, and literature.² Taking place “somewhere in the busy port of Puteoli,” the episode opens “abruptly in the middle of a diatribe by Encolpius on the defects of Roman rhetorical education and the decline of oratory.”³ Agamemnon then proceeds to unfold to Encolpius “the secrets of the trade” (*arte secreta*, 3.1). The Greek rhetorician’s retort includes memorable phrases, such the accusations against the parents who “sacrifice their young hopefuls . . . on the altar of ambition” (*spes . . . suas ambitioni donant*, 4.2) and thus are responsible for the decline of oratory and the ridiculing of their own offspring at the courts, since ultimately they never learn anything at all.

In presenting his arguments to Encolpius, Agamemnon does not spare metaphors that enliven his illustration of the desperate state of rhetoric and the excessive need for declamation schools, thus confirming Encolpius’ claim that such teachers do nothing else but abusing the turgid Asiatic style (*enormis loquacitas Athenas ex Asia commigrauit*, “disordered garrulity decamped from Asia to Athens,” 2.7). In particular, Agamemnon describes extensively how the teachers of rhetoric are forced to use methods previously unknown to attract the *scholastici*:

sicut ficti adulatorum cum cenas diuitum captant, nihil prius meditantur quam id quod putant gratissimum auditoribus fore (nec enim aliter impetrabunt quod petunt nisi quasdam insidias auribus fecerint), sic eloquentiae magister, nisi tanquam piscator eam imposuerit hamis escam, quam scierit appetituros esse pisciculos,⁴ sine spe praedae moratur in scopulo.
(Petr. 3.3–4)

1) For Petronius, I use the corrected Teubner text of K. Müller, *Petroni Arbitri Satyricon Reliquiae* (München / Leipzig 52003), while translations are adapted from P. G. Walsh, *Petronius. The Satyricon* (Oxford 1996). For Plautus, I follow the text and translation W. De Melo, *Plautus: Casina, The Casket Comedy, Curculio, Epidicus, The Two Menaechmuses* (Cambridge, Mass. 2011). Finally, for Suetonius, the Latin text is taken from M. Ihm, *Suetonius: De Vita Caesarum Libri* (Leipzig 1901), and translation from C. Edwards, *Suetonius: Lives of the Caesars* (Oxford 2000).

2) G. L. Schmeling, *A Commentary on the Satyricon of Petronius* (Oxford 2011) 1; Encolpius is attending such declamations because of his age: he is in his early 20s (Schmeling, 9). On the opening scene, see, among others, the discussion in C. Wooten, *Petronius, the Mime, and Rhetorical Education*, *Helios* 3 (1976) 67–74; G. Kennedy, *Encolpius and Agamemnon in Petronius*, *AJPh* 99 (1978) 171–178; W. Kießel, *Petrone Kritik der Rhetorik (Sat. 1–5)*, *RhM* 121 (1978) 311–328; K. Heldmann, *Antike Theorien über Entwicklung und Verfall der Redekunst* (München 1982) 244–247; and N. Breitenstein, *Petronius: Satyricon 1–15* (Berlin 2009) 21–28 and 69–73.

3) Schmeling (above, n. 2) 1.

4) In her commentary, Breitenstein (above, n. 2) 59 points out that the reading *piscis* is found in R and the reading *discipulos* in B, adding in defense of *pisciculos* that “auch das folgende *spe praedae* kann sich nur auf Fische und nicht auf Schüler beziehen.” The diminutive clearly follows forms such as *adulescentuli* in 3.2.

Our plight is like that of flatterers on the stage who cadge dinners from the rich; their chief preoccupation is what they think will please their hearers most, for they will attain their aim only by laying traps for their ears. Likewise, unless the teacher of eloquence turns angler and baits his hook with the morsel which he knows the fish will bite on he stands idle on the rock with no hope of a catch.

As has been observed, Agamemnon here approximates the role of a parasite from mime and comedy,⁵ while he clearly assumes the role of a *captator*.⁶ In his recent commentary, Gareth Schmeling cites the introduction of the parasite Peniculus in Plautus' *Menaechmi*, who defends his job as the "brush" in similar terms: one must bind with the bond of food and drink the person over whom he would like to have control:

*dum tu illi quod edit et quod potet praebeas,
suo arbitratu, ad fatim, cottidie,
numquam edepol fugiet, tam etsi capital fecerit,
facile adseruabis, dum eo uincla uincies.
ita istaec nimis lenta uincla sunt escaria:
quam magis extendas, tanto adstringunt artius.*

(Pl. Men. 90–95)

So long as you provide him with food and drink, at his own discretion, to repletion, every day, he'll never run away, even if he's committed a capital crime. You'll guard him easily so long as you bind him with this bond. Those food chains are terribly tough indeed: the more you stretch them, the more tightly they tie.

The parasite's exposition of his worldview is deeply related to food and drink as the *uincla . . . escaria* (94), like the fisherman's rod and hook with the *esca* to elicit the fish bait. However close these two passages may be though, there is another dimension in Petronius' simile that deserves further investigation and which has heretofore gone unnoticed.⁷ I submit that Agamemnon's metaphor explicitly suggests that the *scholastici*, the school boys, pupils at the schools of declamation, become sexual prey, as the noun *pisciculi* suggests.

5) C. Panayotakis, *Theatrum Arbitri: Theatrical Elements in the Satyrica of Petronius* (Leiden 1995) 7; cf. also N. Slater, *Reading Petronius* (Baltimore 1990) 30. See H. Petersmann, *Language in Petronius' Satyrica*, in: S. Harrison (ed.), *Oxford Readings in the Roman Novel* (Oxford 1999) 105–123: "[Agamemnon] hypocritically imposes on his students ethical and linguistic demands which he himself does not meet" (112).

6) Schmeling (above, n. 2) 12 cites Ter. Eu. 247–253 on the parasite's flattery as bait.

7) There is a sexual pun with Peniculus' name in Plautus, which is intentionally and *παρὰ προσδοκίαν* glossed over: his name means "little dick," but the parasite himself explains it as "brush" because he wipes the tables clean. See A. S. Gratwick, *Plautus: Menaechmi* (Cambridge 1993) 143 and M. Fontaine, *Funny Words in Plautine Comedy* (Oxford 2010) 102–110. On the figuratively sexual connotations of *esca* since Plautus, cf., e. g., As. 221.

Let us look first at the association of rhetoricians and fish as corroborated later in the narrative, during the *Cena Trimalchionis*. Rhetoricians here are said to be born under the sign of Pisces: *in piscibus obsonatores et rhetores* (“under the Fishes, chefs and teachers of rhetoric”). As Schmeling comments, “those prepare and enjoy fish . . . as well as those who buy them (ὄψωνέω), a proper subject under Pisces” (39.13);⁸ then he goes on to make the connection with 3.4 and the simile Agamemnon employs there. Edward Courtney simply observes that “it is as if Trimalchio has heard Agamemnon’s metaphor of fishing for students.”⁹

But what is the purpose and deeper meaning of the presence of fish in the beginning of the *Satyrica*? Or is there one? Victoria Rimell has perceptively argued that in the *Satyrica* it is very important to consider what people eat and what is eaten by them; the reader of the fragmentary narrative becomes immediately aware of the importance of such activity:¹⁰ “‘consumption’ of a sexual partner has been the *Satyricon*’s core model for the absorption of literary knowledge . . . Agamemnon imagines the teacher of oratory ‘feeding’ his fish-pupils with tasty bait.”¹¹

The possibility of interpreting the use of fish imagery by Agamemnon in 3.4 as marginally sexual is corroborated by intertextual evidence that underscores how loaded the term *pisciculi* becomes here. *Pisciculi* is used in 3.4, I argue, precisely because of its sexual connotations, as we can glean from a passage in Suetonius’ account of the life of Tiberius:

Maiore adhuc ac turpiore infamia flagrauit, uix ut referri audiriue, nedum credi fas sit, quasi pueros primae teneritudinis, quos pisciculos uocabat, institueret, ut natanti sibi inter femina uersarentur ac luderent lingua morsuque sensim adpetentes.

(Suet. Tib. 44.1)

He became notorious for still greater and more extreme depravity so that it is almost a crime to describe, to hear, let alone to believe it, the story being that he trained some boys of tender age, whom he called his little fishes, to slip between his thighs when he was swimming and provoke him playfully with their licking and biting.

8) Schmeling (above, n.2) 155–156. G. B. Conte, *The Hidden Author: An Interpretation of Petronius’ Satyricon* (Berkeley 1996) 132 cites here Daedalus, the cook, as an “important figure, at least as important as a professor of rhetoric,” since the two professions are born under the same star: “the common origin binds together their arts and their destinies.”

9) E. Courtney, *A Companion to Petronius* (Oxford 2001) 89. Moreover, fishing takes place aboard the ship (109.6), where the protagonists run into Lichas and his company, to the misfortune of everyone involved: *alius exultantes quaerebat fuscina pisces, alius hamis blandientibus conuellebat praedam repugnantem* (“one man tried to spear the leaping fish with a harpoon, and another sought to haul in his resistant prize on baited hooks”).

10) V. Rimell, *Petronius and the Anatomy of Fiction* (Cambridge 2002) 49–50: “Agamemnon defends his role as purveyor of junk food by playing victim to his ravenous but faddy pupils, who will be fed only the finest canapés: they are fish he must bait from his lonely rock.”

11) Rimell (above, n.10) 132.

The diminutive *pisciculus* is found charged with sexual overtones in both passages in Petronius and Suetonius (OLD² s.v. *pisciculus*; TLL X, pars prior, sectio II 2202.50–58), as well as in a graffito from Pompeii (*Fonticulus Pisciculo suo plur(i)ma(m) salut(em)*), “The Little Spring sends greetings to the Little Fish,” CIL IV 4447).¹² In fact, the graffito reinforces the overtones of the diminutive’s usage in colloquial Latin, and as such it becomes an appropriate term for Petronius to employ in his novel that is otherwise full of colloquialisms of this sort.

Such stories, as the one report by Suetonius, could possibly be the product of rhetorical *uituperatio*, attributing “homosexual tastes” as “deliberately dressed up by Romans in Greek fashion.”¹³ The proximity of the language and the description of Tiberius’ sexual proclivities offer a neglected *comparandum* for the excerpt in Petronius. In parallel with Tiberius’ boys in the pond on Capri, Agamemnon summons similar language to point to a deeply sexual and sensational exploitation of the term “little fish.” After all, this is a story teeming with such innuendos, as it recounts the triangular relationships of the otherwise impotent protagonist, including the embedded story of the sexual relationship between a teacher, Eumolpus, and his Pergamene pupil (85–87). In addition, and most importantly, the sexual connotations attributed to the word *pisciculus* are not isolated: in 2.2, Encolpius had already complained that the *corpus orationis* had been emasculated and “fallen”, precisely because of the practices at the schools of declamation: *leuibus enim atque inanibus sonis ludibria quaedam excitando effecistis ut corpus orationis enervaretur et caderet* (“Your lightweight, empty bleatings have merely encouraged frivolity, with the result that oratory has lost all its vigor and has collapsed”). As the commentators note here, both verbs are sexually charged, *enervuo* because of its association with the *membrum uirile* (OLD² s.v. *enervuo* 2) and *cado* because of its link to penile erection and the lack thereof.¹⁴

What does it mean, however, to allow Petronius to employ the intertext present in Suetonius’ account of Tiberius’ life here? Is the author aware of similar stories circulating in his time regarding the sexual preferences and fetishes of various (Julio–Claudian) emperors? Possibly, and one might add here that Petronius and Suetonius have access to the same source. By summoning imagery that alludes to such anecdotes, Petronius complicates the picture of a straightforward chronology of his work: the *Satyrica* after all could have taken place under Tiberius, Nero, or Vespasian, and its elusive nature has become one of its most intriguing qualities.¹⁵ But if the association that this note proposes is correct, then the date of the *Satyrica* can be placed in the post-Neronian period of the Flavian or early Hadrianic age,

12) J. N. Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (Baltimore 1982) 86 mentions the sexual overtones of a “hole, pit” such as a *piscina*.

13) A. Wallace-Hadrill, *Suetonius* (London 1983) 184; H. Lindsay, *Suetonius: Tiberius* (London 1995) ad loc. attributes this story to rhetorical *uituperatio* against Tiberius, as with the one reported about the male *spintriae* at Tib. 43.1. On Tiberius’ predilection for *fellatio* and *cummilinctus*, see C. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality* (Oxford 2010) 197–200.

14) See Breitenstein (above, n. 2) 41 and Schmeling (above, n. 2) 5.

15) On the difficulty of dating and identifying the author, see most recently Schmeling (above, n. 2) xiii–xvii with C. Vout, *The Satyrica and Neronian Culture*, in: J. Prag / I. Repath (eds), *Petronius: A Handbook* (Malden, Mass. 2009) 101–113, on the Neronian connections.

maybe in the 120s, as several scholars have argued.¹⁶ Assuming that the arguments promoted by critics who support a later dating for Petronius' *Satyrica*, are valid, then the phrase in 3.4 could serve as another prop. Thus a possible interaction with Suetonius' account (or even an allusion to the latter's account) becomes more poignant.

Urbana, IL

Antonios Augoustakis

16) E. g., N. Holzberg, Review of P. Habermehl, *Petronius: Satyrice* 79–141. Ein philologisch-literarischer Kommentar. Bd. 1: Sat. 79–110 (Berlin 2006), *Anc Narr* 7 (2008) 105–112, in particular 108; A. Laird, The True Nature of the *Satyricon*?, in: M. Paschalis et al. (eds), *The Greek and the Roman Novel: Parallel Readings* (Groningen 2007) 151–167, and J. Henderson, The *Satyrica* and the Greek Novel: Revisions and Some Open Questions, *IJCT* 17.4 (2010) 483–496.