

BOOK REVIEW

Petronius: A Handbook. Edited by Jonathan PRAG and Ian REPATH. Oxford, Chichester, and Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009. Pp. xiv + 256. Hardcover, £65.00/\$100.00. ISBN 978-1-4051-5687-5.

This volume presents twelve essays on various aspects of Petronius' *Satyrice*. The introduction states that these essays are written primarily for students, presumably those with little previous knowledge of Petronius. But this should not deter those who have more experience with this text from reading the volume: as the editors observe, there is much of value here for anyone interested in the *Satyrice*. One of the editors' stated goals is to bring together approaches which are elsewhere generally kept separate. This goal is well met: the essays are divided between literary and social or historical approaches, and each presents an interesting issue in Petronian scholarship in a lucid and thought-provoking way.

The first four essays present literary and linguistic aspects. Niall Slater sets the stage for all that follows with his treatment of textual matters, and most importantly, of the single most significant fact about the text of the *Satyrice*: its fragmentary nature and the implications thereof for how we read it. Slater intersperses a narration of the process of reading the novel with the problems thus encountered; overall the essay is a good introduction to several of the most important issues in Petronian scholarship. J. R. Morgan introduces the topic of the Greek literary tradition in the next essay. He chooses to focus on three particularly important Greek predecessors: Homer, Plato, and the Greek Novel. He explicitly rejects the simple enumeration of Petronius' Greek "influences," and focuses instead on "what [Petronius] did with his own and his reader's awareness of Greek literature" (32). The essay thereby effectively summarizes some of the more important questions concerning Petronius' relation to the Greek literary tradition. Costas Panayotakis addresses the even more complex topic of Petronius' relationship to other Latin authors in the third essay. An example of his thought-provoking approach is the argument that Petronius' irreverent treatment of some of the "classics" cannot have any debasing effect on the earlier text or its conceits. A reader might ask: can there not be those who read at least some of Petronius' epic allusions as send-ups of epic and its conventions? Panayotakis thus piques the reader's interest even as he introduces some of the more preva-

lent Roman influences on the *Satyrica*. Victoria Rimell rounds off the “literary” segment of the essays with a contribution on a more fluid topic: Petronius’ use of language and sound. This is a delightful essay; Rimell’s emphasis on the *sounds* of the *Satyrica* as worth noticing calls our attention to an aspect of the work that has not been sufficiently discussed, and at the same time points out some of the pleasures of Petronius’ language.

There follow two essays on the social context of the *Satyrica*; the first, by Amy Richlin, focuses on the issue of sex, beginning with a very brief summary of the social context of the *Satyrica* as far as the sex/gender system is concerned, followed by an exploration of how the roles presented in the novel “complicate the norms depicted above” (84). This piece is entertaining and incisive, and provides a solid examination of one of the more difficult aspects of this novel. Caroline Vout provides the second treatment of the *Satyrica*’s social context in the next contribution. She examines the generally accepted ascription of the *Satyrica* to the Neronian period and asks how this dating shapes our reading of the novel. While rejecting any straightforward attempts to read the *Satyrica* as a novel “about” Nero’s Rome, she argues that it can be read as a novel about “ways of representing reality in a given period” (102), e.g., in Nero’s Rome. More importantly, she points out that dating a work like this, even if done far more securely, is not a way of “solving” the text: there is no shortcut to understanding this complicated novel to be found in paratextual material from the Neronian period any more than the Flavian. It is a thought-provoking piece, and is to be commended on its refusal to treat the Neronian context as either panacea or orthodoxy.

Four historical approaches to the *Satyrica* follow; the first, by Jean Andreau, considers what information about freedmen in the first century can be derived from the novel, and in particular from the “Cena.” Andreau finds Trimalchio himself to be the least useful character for constructing social history (116), and consistently expresses doubts about the historicism of the other freedmen. He wisely ends with the conclusion that we cannot rely on the appeal to novelistic “realism” to simplify the complex business of using a fictional work for studying history. Yet there are correspondences between this fictional world and the real world of the freedmen of the first century, and Andreau presents them well in his interesting and informative essay. Koenraad Verboven’s contribution looks next at the *Satyrica* as a source for economic history, and surveys various types of “data” that may be found in it. This essay will work a little better as a brief introduc-

tion to the economic climate of Imperial Rome for the reader of Petronius than as an introduction to Petronius for an economic historian; the latter group may end up wondering if there is anything we can get from Petronius that we do not already have more reliably from other, nonfictional, sources. Verboven's suggestion, however, is that reading Petronius is worthwhile for the student of the ancient economy nonetheless, since it can "infuse life and color into the most dreary facts and figures" (125); he brings out this side of Petronius quite nicely. Valerie Hope's essay focuses next on one specific part of Petronius' text (the "Cena," and especially the passages relating to Trimalchio's tomb), and asks how the *Satyrica*, and in particular Trimalchio's funerary monument and his discussion of it, fits in with Roman funerary practices. She emphasizes both the usefulness of the work for understanding Roman tombs, as well as the dangers in using this text too much (159). Hope manages to bring in a surprising amount of material from the *Satyrica* that is not part of her central passage; her narrow focus, moreover, allows her to construct a more in-depth argument than was possible in many of the other contributions. Shelley Hales rounds out the "historical" approaches with a look at domestic space in the *Satyrica*. Her essay focuses on Trimalchio's mansion, and makes the interesting suggestion that the humor of Petronius' presentation of this domestic space may lie not in its inevitable vulgarity, but rather in a "more subtle interplay with prevailing traditions of domestic display" (164). To illustrate this interplay, she examines the remains of the House of the Vettii in comparison with Trimalchio's villa.

The last two essays in the volume address the reception of the *Satyrica*. The first, by Stephen Harrison, surveys the influence Petronius has had on modern novels in English. Harrison chooses to limit the scope of his essay to the reception of the "Cena." What stands out most in Harrison's essay is a strong sense of the remarkable variety of later authors' interactions with Petronius, from the recasting of the entire novel in 20th-century Texas (*Peter Arbiter*) to the passing reference to Trimalchio as a literary creation (*Pompeii*). Readers will find here an enticing and intriguing testament to the lasting influence of Petronius and his characters. The final essay, by Joanna Paul, deals with one specific point of reception, that of the film *Fellini-Satyriicon*. This is a brief critical study of the film, its creation, and its relationship to the Petronian original; it will certainly be useful for students of film who may be interested in Fellini's relationship to his model, but it is even more effective for those students of Petronius who would like to be able to watch Fellini's vision of the novel from an informed position.

Students who know little about Petronius and would like to find out more will certainly benefit from reading this volume; more experienced scholars will still likely find something novel in the various essays. The work has a few minor shortcomings, to be sure; an excessive focus on the “Cena,” and an imbalance between the “literary” approaches and the “historical” in terms of their respective focuses, are the two most notable. These imbalances, however, which are quite understandable in an introductory work, hardly detract from the overall value of the volume, which provides plenty of direction for further research to make up for any gaps. And there is another sense in which a great deal of balance *is* achieved in the various contributions: students will encounter a healthy diversity of interpretations of the same passages. This kind of balance will provide students with a strong sense of what is most enjoyable about deeper study of Petronius: the many ways he can be read, the many and intriguing discussions and debates he can spark, and the many questions his work will continue to raise. This volume will serve well to set students on the path towards those deeper examinations.