

BOOK REVIEW

Petronius and Seneca: Satyricon, Apocolocyntosis. By GARETH SCHMELING. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020. Pp. 544. Hardback, \$28.00. ISBN: 9780674997370.

There's much to like in this new Loeb of Petronius and Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis*. That the old Loeb needed some sprucing up is a given: the 1913 version (although revised at intervals) was still rife with translations such as the following:

“You are in the right on't,” quoth Quartilla, “twas well thought on: and since we have so fine an opportunity, why should not our Pannychis be unvirgined?” (*Sat.* 25.1)

And,

Agatho and a few pettifoggers were weeping for grief, and for once in a way they meant it. The Barristers were crawling out of their dark corners, pale and thin, with hardly a breath in their bodies, as though just coming to life again. (*Apo.* 12)

In addition, the previous Loeb's bibliography and interpretations were woefully out-of-date and, at times, even misleading. Schmeling's new Loeb not only provides a smart and accurate translation of these texts, but also helpful notes and forceful introductions. While the Petronius material is especially captivating, Schmeling's work on the *Apocolocyntosis* is problematic.

Schmeling spent much of his career working on Petronius,¹ so it is no surprise that his translation and introductory material are vibrant, informative and

¹In addition to his 2011 *A Commentary to the Satyricon of Petronius*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), Schmeling was also the editor of the [annual](#) *Newsletter of the Petronian Society*, and published over 40 articles and book chapters about the *Satyricon*.

erudite. What may be surprising is the amount of effort he has put into his description of the text of Petronius in the introduction. What had been a modest 10 pages of reporting testimonia, manuscripts and textual transmission in the earlier edition (and only 4 pages of his *Commentary*) has blossomed into 27 pages of detailed accounting. While some students and casual readers (do casual readers buy Loeb's?) may be befuddled about the importance of certain minutiae, textual criticism wonks will enjoy hearing that "Vannini reports that Ernesto Stagni has suggested to him that Theodulf, born in Spain of Visigothic descent, bishop of Orléans circa 798-818 and abbot of Fleury, who helped to prepare the manuscripts, could have been instrumental in importing the *Satyrica* to France from Spain" (25-6). Concise sections on the author and date of *Satyrica*, as well as what would be expected of an ancient novel are handled with deft and convincing prose. My only complaint is the brevity of certain modes of analysis that Schmeling outlines. For instance, Schmeling authoritatively states, "The present editor would set aside any label of satire and read the work as a resourceful clash of understanding and misunderstanding reality" (8), which is provocative, but not really defended in his brief considerations of the *Satyrica* as a work of fiction. Surely there is *some* satire, even if it might not be the *raison d'être* of the *Satyrica* as a whole. In his section on secondary literature, Schmeling helpfully points out where one can find more about certain topics like the lives of freedmen (D'Arms, Bodel) and even "corporealities, eating substances and excreting them as literature" (Rimell). This will be very helpful for students and scholars who want to know a good place to begin investigating topics further. The 16 pages of up-to-date bibliography are more than sufficient, and I found the introduction, in general, quite useful for a class on Petronius that I taught in the spring.

The translation is not a mere crib but a compelling narrative; it rings true. Schmeling finds the right moments for idioms and his pacing highlights the momentum that this novel achieves, especially in the inset tales. The collected fragments are an additional boon for both the scholar and the armchair Latinist. My only criticism (and this is the case for the *Apocolocyntosis* as well) is that he does not offset or indicate in the translation when poetic passages appear, so Eumolpus' iambic *Troiae halosis* (*Sat.* 89) looks and reads the same as Niceros' prose werewolf tale (*Sat.* 62). But this is a small quibble for a very successful translation of a text that can offer real hurdles for any translator.

After making my way through Schmeling's *Satyrica*, I was expecting the *Apocolocyntosis* section to be equally effective and dazzling. Unfortunately, I found that it felt like an addendum and, apparently, not a very pleasurable task for Schmeling.

He denigrates Seneca on nearly every page of his introduction, believing him to be a mere “amateur philosopher” (455), “derivative” (456) and “dour” (458), who “was vain enough to think that his cracker-barrel philosophy could alter and improve the character of Nero and have some beneficial influence on Agrippina” (458). While Seneca may not be everyone’s favorite author, surely scholarship on Seneca has come to a point where we see him as more than a mere pseudo-Stoic bootlicker and “a parody of an interesting human being” (459). Schmeling’s dislike of Seneca will sour readers on the *Apocolocyntosis* before they begin reading his translation of this absorbing Menippean satire. This is too bad because the translation itself is refined and sharp, and one could easily assign it to a class and learn much from the discerning notes and keen apparatus criticus. If “for once in his life Seneca displayed some wit and invention” (460), that was evidently not enough for Schmeling to add Seneca to his index in any shape or manner.² It makes for a disappointing ending of an otherwise exemplary text; I’d advise the Loeb editors to find someone who appreciates Seneca more in their next edition, or simply include the *Apocolocyntosis* with other works of Seneca, where it might find a more appreciative reader of his clever and learned texts.

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² One finds an appendix featuring a valuable seating chart to the *Cena Trimalchionis*, an “Index of Characters in Petronius” and an “Index of Other Names in Petronius.” No index to the *Apocolocyntosis* is to be found, whereas the original Loeb had an “Index to Seneca.”