EUMOLPUS POETA AT WORK:
REHEARSED SPONTANEITY IN THE SATYRICON

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Abstract

The distorting mirror of Petronius's Satyricon offers one of the richest portraits of a poet at work in ancient literature. The impoverished poet and raconteur Eumolpus joins the action of the novel in chapter 83 when at the art gallery he attempts to pick up the narrator Encolpius by declaiming verses on the destruction of Troy. While presented as a spontaneous oral ecphrasis of Homeric paintings in the gallery, his recital shows numerous signs of being a previous composition, slightly or perhaps not at all adapted to the occasion. Both his literate composition and oral performance are on display later, when the scribbling poet is pulled from the wreckage of Lichas's ship and then recites epic verse on the Roman civil war. While both of Eumolpus's major poems have been studied in detail as both parody of contemporary styles and development of a key character in the novel, these and yet more poetic performances within the novel, even where unsuccessful, offer rich insight into the culture of oral performance at various levels of Neronian society. Eumolpus's two narrated stories (usually identified as Milesian tales) about his adventures with the Pergamene boy and the exemplum of the widow of Ephesus are far more successful performances. Here the poet displays a nuanced sense of both audience and occasion, and the reception of these stories by internal audiences of the novel can be read as further commentary on composition and performance in Neronian culture.

The distorting mirror of Petronius's Satyricon offers one of the richest portraits of a poet at work in ancient literature, in the person of the impoverished poet and raconteur Eumolpus. Eumolpus joins the action of the novel in chapter 83 when he attempts to pick up the narrator Encolpius in an art gallery. He soon replaces Ascylos in the unstable triad with Encolpius and Giton that carries the narrative onward. His numerous performances of both poetry and prose narrative are key to the powerful impression he makes in the novel. I propose here to look at the hints of how Eumolpus prepares for his performances, particularly in poetry, but in one or two prose forms as well. My conclusion that Eumolpus is a far better storyteller than poet will surprise no one, but I hope

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1 The classic discussion of Eumolpus as raconteur is Beck (1979).
also to show that a key part of Eumolpus’s poetic persona is the desire to present himself as a more spontaneous, more oral performer than he actually is—yet at the same time more confined by the practices and consequences of literacy than he himself realizes. Petronius’s sardonic view of both the poet and his audiences enriches our sense of the foibles and perils of Neronian performance culture.

The first encounter of Encolpius and Eumolpus takes place in a pinacotheca, which Mike Lippman has recently argued might be part of a temple of Fortuna. While he begins his description by dropping the names of famous Greek painters (Zeuxis, Protogenes, and Apelles), what really interests Encolpius are the pictures showing the (mis)fortunes of lovers. The fates of Ganymede, Hylas, and Hyacinthus inspire him to soliloquy:

inter quos etiam pictorum amantium vultus tamquam in solitudine exclamavi: “ergo amor etiam deos tangit.” (83. 4)

Among these faces of painted lovers, I burst forth, like one crying in the wilderness: “So love touches even the gods!”

Encolpius’s narcissistic reading of his own fate in the art he contemplates finds echoes in ecphrastic scenes in the Greek novel, while Roman readers might also have been reminded of Aeneas’s viewing of the Trojan War scenes in Carthage in Aeneid 1. Given that Encolpius seems more interested in exercising his emotions than understanding them, an even more apt comparison might be the story of Brutus’s wife Porcia, who on attempting to leave her husband in Greece is overcome by seeing a painting of Hector parting from Andromache and returns again and again to weep before it.  

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2 Lippman (2008).
3 Slater (1990: 91 and n. 9), comparing the opening ecphrastic scenes in Achilles Tatius 1. 1–2 and Longus 1. 3; whether this is specifically parody of existing Greek novel traditions is problematic, given the lack of evidence for extended Greek prose fictions before Petronius (Morgan 2009. 40–46, with further references), if we continue to assume a Neronian date (Rose [1971]); now contra Henderson (2010). Cf. Aen. 1. 462: sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt.
4 The story is recorded in Plutarch but, if not wholly invented, would have been current in Petronius’s day as well: “Brutus determined to abandon Italy, and came by land through Lucania to Elea by the sea. As Porcia was about to return thence to Rome, she tried to conceal her distress, but a certain painting betrayed her, in spite of her noble spirit hitherto. Its subject was Greek—Andromache bidding farewell to Hector; she was taking from his arms their little son, while her eyes were fixed upon her husband. When Porcia saw this, the image of her own sorrow presented by it caused her to burst into tears, and she would visit it many times a day and weep before it” (Plutarch, Life of Brutus 23. 1–4, trans. Perrin).