THEATRICAL ELEMENTS IN THE EPISODE ON BOARD LICHAS’ SHIP (PETRONIUS, SATYRICA 99.5-115).*

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I.

The sea-trip, which usually ends up with a shipwreck or with an attack by pirates, occurs in almost all of the surviving Greek romances, causing misfortunes for the heroes and enjoyment for the readers of the novels1). The reason for these trips is not always justified by the author or the narrator, and in such cases the audience of the novel simply accepts -or, rather, expects- its introduction in the plot as a narrative device for more adventures and entertainment to come. This is the case in Petronius’ novel. The reason for the voyage is not apparent from the text. After the mimic interlude at the inn (92.1-99.4), where Encolpius, the anti-hero of the novel, and his lover, Giton, had rented a room, the two hustlers entrust themselves to the custody of Eumolpus (98.8), the manic poetaster, who will accompany them until the end of the novel’s surviving fragments. The latter, having previously decided to take a sea-journey at some time (101.3), suggests in a rather casual manner (99.4): Itaque, quod bene eveniat, expedite sarcinulas et, vel sequimini me vel, si mavultis, ducite. (‘Well then, may everything turn out well; prepare your belongings and either follow me or, if you prefer, lead

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the way'). Eumolpus' instruction suggests that Encolpius and Giton have already agreed to embark with him.

A knock at the door signals the beginning of the episode on board Lichas' ship: it is a fierce sailor bidding them to hurry, but the wording of the text crepuit ostium impulsus ('the door was pushed and creaked open' (99.5)) reminds one of the typical formula sed crepuit foris which is used in comedy to announce the entrance of a new person on stage, who will advance the development of the plot. The purpose of this paper is to examine whether there are any theatrical elements in the events that take place during that trip, which can prove that the conventional voyage becomes in Petronius' hands an entertaining spectacle with the spirit of a low theatrical piece. The theatricality of this scene will be demonstrated through its staged setting, the type-cast comic characters involved in it, the farcical intrigues in its plot, the employment of theatrical devices for comic effect (dreams, recognition, trial-scene, brawl, false death), and the melodramatic tone of the dialogue between Encolpius and Giton during the shipwreck.

II. The Theatrical Setting of the Scene

The nature of a sea-trip itself, inserted as one event in a series of adventures in a novel, inclines one to think that it can take place only in non-theatrical texts, where its description can be achieved through narration and not through actual representation on stage.

2) Pl. Amph. 496; Aul. 665; Bacch. 234, 610, 1057; Cas. 163, 813, 874, 936; Curr. 486; Men. 348, 523; Mil. 154, 270, 328; Most. 1063; Per. 404; Poen. 741. Note that a similar knock opened other staged episodes in the novel: the Quartilla-scene (16.1) and the mimic interlude at the inn (92.1). Petronius seems to use conventional theatrical techniques to pass from one episode to another. For an account of theatrical elements in the Quartilla-episode (16.1-26.6) see my article Quartilla's Histrionics in Petronius, Mnemosyne 47 (1994), 319-336.

3) Although A. Collignon, Étude sur Pétrone. La critique littéraire, l'imitation et la parodie dans le Satiricon (Paris 1892), 276-279 noticed some of the theatrical elements of this episode, it was M. Rosenblüth, Beiträge zur Quellenkunde von Petrons Satiren (Berlin 1909), 48-49, who argued first, though briefly, for the interpretation of the scene as 'Der Mimus auf dem Schiffe'. Since then there has been no extant treatment of the whole episode from a theatrical point of view, but only occasional remarks, whose contribution to the staged character of the Petronian passages will be acknowledged during this paper.