

The Sacred Geese of Priapus? (Satyricon 136, 4f.)

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136,4 *cum ecce tres anseres sacri qui ut puto medio die solebant ab anu diaria exigere impetum in me faciunt*

cum ... sacri LO¹, *qui ... exigere* L, *postea* LO] *cum ecce* L: *et ecce* O* *sacri* del. Müller (1965), *vult retinere* Rose

In his second edition of the *Satyricon* (note 11) Müller deletes *sacri* on the ground that the narrator of the incident which here commences, Encolpius, acts in a manner quite unsuited to any knowledge that the geese are sacred. He kills one without a moment's thought and instead of the congratulation fully expected (136, 12 *putaveram me rem laude etiam dignam fecisse*) receives a storm of abuse from the goose's owner, Oenothea the priestess of Priapus. It is not a deletion lightly to be undertaken, because this single word, taken together with the description of the dead bird as *Priapi delicias* (137, 2), appears to be the only literary evidence available to connect religiously Priapus the god of sex and fertility with geese². Clearly, without *sacri* the relationship is threatened.

Even more remarkably the textual argument raises the whole question of Petronius' narrative technique and his competence as an author. In answering Müller's deletion Rose concedes that removal of *sacri* would improve the narrative (in that the narrator would no longer be credited with knowledge of the importance of the geese and would thus be free to act in ignorance), yet he sees the word as Petronius' means to avert *the reader* to Encolpius' fresh troubles³. To Rose it is an example of the "limitations and difficulties" of the author's use of first-person narrative. Instead of questioning the status of the geese Rose assumes failings in Petronian technique. Other scholars while taking a more positive line appear to be coming to grips with the same problem in their discussion of Encolpius' character. The modern critics such as Rankin, Veyne, Walsh and Zeitlin provide strong composites, giving pictures of a rather brilliant inconsistency which one can admire for their cleverness without being con-

1 The *sigla* are those used in K. Müller, *Petronii Arbitri Satyricon* (München 1961).

2 As such the present passage is cited in both standard reference works (TLL s.v. *anser*, P-W s.v. *Gans*), and in studies on Roman religion (e.g. H. Herter, *De Priapo* [Giessen 1932] 226. 282) and on animals (e.g. O. Keller, *Die antike Tierwelt* [Leipzig 1909–1913] II 221; J. M. C. Toynbee, *Animals in Roman Life and Art* [Ithaca 1973] 263).

3 K. F. C. Rose, *Petroniana*, *Latomus* 26 (1967) 136sq. E. H. Warmington, *Petronius* (London/Cambridge, Mass. 1969) 360 notes the deletion but prefers to retain.

vinced⁴. Yet there is a clear hint of failure in the Rose manner when Sullivan perceives a lack of roundness to Encolpius – an inferiority to Trimalchio – and George implies a sacrificing of style in the interests of comedy and satire. And most recently Smith sees the author as uncertain whether to make Encolpius a naive observer or an ironical critic; and as inconsistent in his placing of Encolpius' character and intellectual level⁵.

The Petronian achievement was rescued from having to be viewed in either of these rather contradictory lights by two articles of R. Beck, in which the author argued that the part played by inconsistency whether for good or bad has been distorted through failure to view Encolpius as two distinct people – a naive, youthful protagonist *in place*, and a maturer, serener narrator shaping his past into entertaining episodes⁶. To my mind Beck has produced a satisfying model both for interpreting the diversity of Encolpius' stances and (as is pertinent to the present discussion) for fully acquitting the *Satyricon* of structural defects. I propose, then, to show that the device of double-characterization produces here too an episode that, far from being replete with narrative oddities, is carefully paced and structured.

Encolpius the I-narrator is describing a visit he once paid to Oenothea, a priestess of Priapus, in hopes of her curing an unshakeable bout of impotence. The physical circumstances of the adventure are as follows: Oenothea leaves him alone in the door of her hut while she goes off to fetch fire for the ceremony. Three geese suddenly fly at him with much noise and peck at his clothing and legs⁷. He grabs a table leg and slays the most aggressive animal, and the others retire. Flinging the body behind the bed, he bathes his wound and prepares to leave, when Oenothea returns. While she makes the fire she asks Encolpius what he has been up to in her absence, and he tells her of the battle with the geese. The dead bird is produced and offered. Oenothea takes it badly and he volunteers an ostrich. He sits down on the bed. Proselenos enters, sees the dead goose and bursts into tears. Encolpius gives Oenothea two gold pieces and she calms down, excusing her behaviour.

This is what happened to Encolpius the protagonist or player in the incident. At the level of action he is by turns impulsive, unthinking, vigorous, sly,

4 For a fuller discussion of such views see R. Beck, *Some Observations on the Narrative Technique of Petronius*, Phoenix 27 (1973) 42sq. To Beck's references add F. Zeitlin, *Petronius as Paradox*, TAPA 102 (1971) 670.

5 J. P. Sullivan, *The Satyricon of Petronius* (Bloomington/London 1968) 118; P. George, *Style and Character in the Satyricon*, Arion 5 (1966) 336–358; M. Smith, *Petronii Arbitri Cena Trimalchionis* (Oxford 1975) 96. 200.

6 R. Beck, art. cit. (note 4) and *Encolpius at the Cena*, Phoenix 29 (1975) 271–283.

7 Discomfort caused by attacks from large domestic avians is apparently an enduring comic motif. See P. G. Wodehouse, *Very Good, Jeeves!* (Harmondsworth 1957) 27, where a swan gives Jeeves and Wooster some bad moments. This places Petronius, too, squarely within the farcical tradition.

evasive, tactless, insensitive and, finally, practical. Petronius then has Encolpius as narrator shape the bare facts into an amusing story, allowing the revealing of his progressive mental reactions at the time: fear – elation – guilt – pride – compassion – confusion – surprise – derision – boredom. The full control over the incident gained thereby allows the story-telling Encolpius to orchestrate the listener's response: it points up a new and ironical self-awareness and has him acknowledge the pretensions and fantasies, the gaffes and gaucheries, of his past. An obvious mechanism is the epic tone contrasting with the mean act and squalid setting⁸. Proof of this second layer of composition – this intervention of the narrator – is to hand: in *ut puto* at 136, 4 and *ut existimo* at 136, 7 we have the saner, maturer man offering rationalizations during the narration which the young adventurer had neither the time nor the temperament to feel. There is further Petronian irony here, in that these arch, self-conscious and pedestrian reflections show up even the new and reformed Encolpius as a man of limited mental powers⁹. At 136, 12 there is another and most telling clue to this process: *ego qui putaveram me rem laude etiam dignam fecisse*. The pluperfect has the effect of contradicting the formerly-held view. Encolpius the protagonist thought he deserved praise; Encolpius the narrator can see now that he did not. (We should thus not read *putabam*, as Buecheler surmised¹⁰.)

Let us now test the presence of *sacri* and the knowledge it conveys by reference to the Beck model. Was this information part of the original consciousness of Encolpius the protagonist? If this sacredness is to have any proper meaning beyond a vague or casual sanctity attached to all geese, I think one would have to conclude that it was not. It goes against Encolpius' youthful indifference to be so informed, and it is refuted by his genuine astonishment at the reaction his deed provokes: 136, 14 *confusus itaque et novitate facinoris attonitus*. Attributing *sacri* in the text to his maturer conclusions might at first glance seem capable of putting an end to the problem and justifying retention, but difficulties remain: the information supplied (presumably gained from Oenothea's outburst) has little artistic point. It adds nothing to Encolpius' character and cannot be viewed ironically, like *ut puto*. And those who might wish it as a piece of dramatic irony intended for the *audience* meet a serious obstacle when Encolpius' attitude does not change in the least after being told what he has done. He still does not treat the geese as *sacri* – worthy of more respect – and he is obviously quite unmoved by any prospect of renewed persecution by the deity to whom only a short while earlier he had prayed for release and pardon (133, 2–3; see also at 134, 2 *deos*

8 Cf. Beck, art. cit. (note 4) 57sq.

9 There is also here something of the feigned modesty of the teller of the Milesian Tale: a stance of dullness or gullibility all the better to pique the listener's anticipation.

10 F. Buecheler, *Petronii Satirae* (Berlin/Zürich 1963) 197. H. Petersmann, *Petrone's urbane Prosa* (Wien 1977) 181 supports the reading, but only on syntactical grounds ("das verschobene Plusquamperfekt"), thus missing the nuance.

iratos, 134, 8 *malo astro natus*). Furthermore, when ill luck sexually continues to dog him he does not connect it with this incident: 139, 4 *sequitur gravis ira Priapi*; 140, 11 *me numen inimicum ibi quoque invenit*. And at 137, 5 he gives an important clue to his final attitude to the geese, *after* being told they are *Priapi delicias*: [*Proselenos*] *flere meum, non publicum anserem, occidissem*. *Publicus* here (and this has been missed by translators) means “in the public domain” – not reserved for the gods by nature or human agency. It stands on the evidence of Cicero *De legibus* 3, 13, 31 as a direct antonym to *sacer*: *villae signis et tabulis refertae partim publicis partim sacris et religiosis*¹¹. The goose, according to the old *Encolpius*, was *never* entitled to religious protection, and there seems no artistic point in the new *Encolpius* contradicting this. As shown, it cannot be permitted merely to hint at trouble ahead; and its inclusion upsets the pacing of the story and jeopardizes the carefully-laid view of the two *Encolpiuses*. The point is *Oenothea*’s inexplicably violent response, which in the light of her quick appeasement seems humorously contrived.

As a final possible explanation for including *sacri* while preserving a good twist to the story Rose wonders if *Encolpius in situ* did not think the geese were sacred to *Juno*, a goddess for whom he presumably would have little time. If this were a reasonable assumption and one shared by the audience, suspense would be maintained. This explanation also founders because *Encolpius*’ attitude does not change when *Oenothea* associates the geese with *Priapus*. He may be insensitive, but he is not completely obtuse. As for the audience’s assumptions, the evidence for *Juno*’s permanent tutelage of geese is very slight, and even *Livy*’s passage about the geese on the *Capitol* (5, 47, 4) has been argued to be valueless in religious terms, or at best ambiguous¹². One doubts that it was the common assumption. Whether, if *sacri* existed in the passage, the audience might assume the geese were sacred to *Priapus* is a matter for the external evidence, to which one now turns.

Scholars have been quick to favour the *Petronian* evidence, and especially the wording *tres anseres sacri*, as a direct contribution to the study of both

11 See e.g. Warmington, op. cit. (note 3) “a common goose”; J. P. Sullivan, *Petronius: The Satyricon* (Harmondsworth 1965) “a communal goose”; K. Müller and W. Ehlers, *Satyricon* (München 1965) “eine Allerweltsgans”. Cf. also *Plautus Trinummus* 4, 3, 37 *mores autem rapere properant qua sacrum qua publicum*. For the “legal” definition of *sacer* see *Festus* 468 (424 Lindsay) quoting *Aelius Gallus*: *Sacrum esse quocumque modo atque instituto civitatis consecratum sit, sive aedis, sive ara, sive signum, sive locus, sive pecunia, sive quid aliud, quod dis dedicatum atque consecratum sit: quod autem privati suae religionis causa aliquid earum rerum deo dedicent, id pontifices Romanos non existimare sacrum*. Thus *Encolpius* was on firm legal grounds!

12 P-W s.v. *Gans* 722: “Zunächst aber kann *anser sacri Iunonis* so verstanden werden wie *sacrum deae pecus* (*Livy* 24, 3, 4) wie das der *Iuno Lacinia* von *Kroton* gehörige Vieh genannt wird.” The contributor, *Herter*, also points out that no work of art has been found in which *Juno* possesses the attributes of geese.

Roman religion and bestiary, but have been silent generally on the possible reasons for the link between geese and Priapus¹³. If the connexion were part of the ancient consciousness it is reasonable to expect other occurrences in the literature, art and folk-imagination of the time. Literature, whether myth or metaphor, might provide evidence of good quality – and indeed geese *are* proverbial for several characteristics, but fertility is not one (see note 13). For example there is Vergil's *improbans anser* (Georgics 1, 119) referring to the voracious and thieving habits of the wild as opposed to the domestic goose. Frequent reference is made to the goose's love of water (see e.g. Priapea 61, 11 *aquosus anser*); and also to its extraordinary voice which, together with a habit for light sleep and a sense of smell far superior to dogs, made it a superb watch-animal. Here at least we have a connexion with Priapus, whose garden statues also had a deterrent effect that might well be supplemented with a few geese¹⁴. Contemporary evidence for this practice is lacking. Geese were used in sacrifice, of course, and in hepatoscopy (the involuntary fate of the present animal) – a practice by no means reserved for Priapus. But here we have simply the pets (*delicias*) of the temple precinct (and a rather lowly and suspect one it is) and not birds destined for killing.

Geese, the first of the tamed fowls in Europe, have been pets and play-things to bring pleasure and comfort, especially to women, since at least Homer, where Penelope loved to watch her flock of twenty pick up their grain (Odyssey 19, 537 *ἰαίνομαι εἰσορόωσα*). They are pictured on numerous vases, and seem to have symbolized domesticity and the careful wife. This is perhaps what Oenothea alludes to at 137, 2 *anserem omnibus matronis acceptissimum*. Although Priapus too was popular with women in a jocular and obscene way (Priapea 8, 4 *videntque magnam matronae quoque mentulam libenter*; cf. Martial 3, 68) this still does not prove the goose sacred to him. The decisive point seems to me that the goose appears to have been innocent of Priapic attributes in the common mind: unlike the cock, whose head we see on Priapic statues, he was not *procax*; unlike the ass or sparrow he was not *salax* (see Priapea 14, 1 *dei salacis*, 26, 4 *verniss passeribus salaciores*, 52, 9 *salax asellus nilo deterius mutuniatus*). Of course if one digs deep enough there are sexual uses for the goose in the folk apothecary: goose tongues eaten could move women to lust (Pliny 30, 143), and the skin eaten helped female complaints. The fat smeared on the penis was supposed to relieve pain. And yet more often the goose will cure such things as earache, nosebleeds and tired blood. On the occasions that geese are linked directly to deities such as Aphrodite I would impute it to the general erotic symbolism which the ancients attached to many animals – cocks, ducks, swans,

13 H. Herter, op. cit. (note 2) 282 is the exception with the rather lame and unsupported *videlicet propter fecunditatem*.

14 With a sense of awe at the coincidence one reads in the local press that geese are used to guard plant nurseries in New Jersey.

deer, panthers. The evidence in art and iconography is often troubled by difficulty in telling the birds apart¹⁵. The external evidence, then, does not amount to very much – certainly not enough, in my view, to establish an automatic connexion between sacred geese and Priapus in a Roman audience.

To conclude: on both internal and external grounds it seems most unlikely that Petronius was responsible for *sacri* – the chief piece of evidence for any sacred status to geese. Maintaining it in the text appears to be justified even by its defenders only by assuming that the author made fundamental errors in constructing this episode. This is an assumption never proved and refuted by the Beck model illustrating the author's subtlety and craftsmanship. Its presence is owed to that class of corruption known as the explanatory gloss, of which in the Satyricon there are a number of examples¹⁶. In this case the information was prompted by *Priapi delicias* and the fuss over the killing of the goose and suggested by some scribe's notion of Roman sacral lore. The interpolation was detected by the structural difficulties which it gives the passage (which go away after deletion), and by the lack of external corroboration. When it comes to linking geese with Priapus in any fixed and sacral sense one feels that in future Petronius should best be left out of the argument.

15 See G. K. Galinsky, *Aeneas, Sicily and Rome* (Princeton 1969) 207; C. Sourvinou-Inwood, *Persephone and Aphrodite at Locri*, *JHS* 98 (1978) 116. Sourvinou-Inwood cites D'Arcy Thompson, *A Glossary of Greek Birds* (Oxford 1936) 329 for evidence that the goose was considered an erotic bird (109). Yet Thompson's examples are thin and inconclusive. For Aphrodite and Eros riding on a goose see R. A. Higgins, *Greek Terracottas* (London 1967) 91 and Plate 40A.

16 See K. Müller, *op. cit.* (note 1) XXXIX–XLVII.