

**XXVIII. The Purpose of Petronius' *Bellum civile*:****A Re-examination**

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## I

Of the two miniature epic poems recited by Eumolpus in the *Satiricon* of Petronius, one depicting the fall of Troy (89) and the other setting forth the outbreak of civil war between Caesar and Pompey (119–24.1), the latter has evoked much attention over the centuries. The author of a recent and highly acclaimed translation of the *Satiricon* refers to this poem as “probably the most difficult crux” of the entire work and describes “the central problem” as “that of knowing just what purpose Eumolpus’ lengthy epic effusion is meant to serve.”<sup>1</sup> He confesses himself unsatisfied with the customary explanations, most of which since 1842 have related the poem to the *De bello civili* (or, as it is often designated, the *Pharsalia*) of Lucan in one way or another.

Even in the late seventeenth century critics had seen a reference to Lucan’s epic in the “belli civilis ingens opus” of the passage immediately preceding the poem (118.6).<sup>2</sup> But the view that the poem itself was intended as serious criticism of Lucan was first voiced by Moessler in his *De Petronii poemate De bello civili*<sup>3</sup> and other tracts, in which he regarded the poem as a parody of the epic of Lucan. Westerburg took up this theory but added a personal contribution to the effect that the poem contained both satire and travesty.<sup>4</sup> Other scholars also affirmed a Petronius–Lucan relationship in the poem, but viewed the relationship in different ways. To Souriau and Hosius the “*Bellum civile*” appeared to be an imitation of the *Pharsalia*,<sup>5</sup> a view developed

<sup>1</sup> William Arrowsmith (New York 1960) 185.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Erhard in his *Symbolae*, “Tangit Lucanum”; Bongarsius in his *Notae*, “Lucanus videtur reprehendi.” Both commentaries appear in the second edition of the *Satiricon* printed by Burmann at Utrecht in 1743.

<sup>3</sup> *Breslau Programm*, 1842.

<sup>4</sup> *RhM* 38 (1883) 92 ff.

<sup>5</sup> The former in *De deorum ministeriis in Pharsalia* (Paris 1885), and the latter in *Lucani De bello civili* (Leipzig 1905).

at great length by Baldwin in her intensive study of Petronius' epic.<sup>6</sup> Heitland, in his introduction to Haskins' edition of Lucan,<sup>7</sup> stated that Petronius' piece was "thrown off half in rivalry half in imitation of Lucan" and added that it "reads like a fair copy written to show Lucan how to do it." The belief that Petronius had in mind a lesson to Lucan how the job should be done was set forth also by Klebs.<sup>8</sup> A more serious arraignment of the *De bello civili* was posited in Collignon's belief that Petronius sought to rebuke Lucan for the latter's too faithful adherence to history and failure to interpose "le merveilleux mythologique";<sup>9</sup> in Trampe's demonstration that the attack extended beyond the historical to the metrical rationale of the *Pharsalia*;<sup>10</sup> and in Sage's view that Lucan's "choice of subject, his insufficient preparation, his too prosaic manner" were all criticized.<sup>11</sup>

## II

Although most critics of the last 120 years have seen the poem of Petronius as an attack in some way on the epic of Lucan, not all have shared that view. Some indeed have taken the poem—or, more accurately, the critical passage preceding it—as burlesque and even, indirectly, as a defense of Lucan by means of an attack on traditional methods.<sup>12</sup> This argument is supported by the tongue-in-cheek attitude evinced constantly by Petronius but is more cogently refuted by the literary and aesthetic credo espoused throughout his work, as Sage has made clear. Other critics have attached significance to the fact that Petronius chose as the reciter of the poem the disreputable versifier Eumolpus; and it is Eumolpus rather than Lucan who in the opinion of E. Thomas is satirized.<sup>13</sup> Margaritori described the poem as a mere reproduction of the epic convention of the day, to which Petronius could not have attached much importance, assigning it, as he did, to a tattered, mendicant poet.<sup>14</sup> Similar disparagement of both

<sup>6</sup> *The Bellum Civile of Petronius* (New York 1911).

<sup>7</sup> London, 1887.

<sup>8</sup> *Philologus* Supplementband 6 (1891–1893) 695–98.

<sup>9</sup> *Étude sur Pétrone* (Paris 1892) 208–9.

<sup>10</sup> *De Lucani arte metrica* (Berlin 1884).

<sup>11</sup> "Atticism in Petronius," *TAPA* 46 (1915) 55.

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., Plessis, *La poésie latine* (Paris 1909) 509.

<sup>13</sup> *L'Envers de la société romaine d'après Pétrone* (Paris 1912).

<sup>14</sup> *Petronio Arbitro* (Vercelli 1897).

the epic and its reciter had been expressed over a century earlier by Voltaire, who, in his speech on his reception into the French Academy in 1746, had declared, "... though distinguished here and there by charming strokes of wit, [it] is no more than the whimsical reproduction of a young man of mean condition, whose manners and style were alike irregular."<sup>15</sup> It should be noted, however, that the low regard in which Eumolpus is held by these critics was not shared by Encolpius. On their first meeting he described the poet as one "qui videretur nescio quid magnum promittere" (*Satiricon* 83.7). That the attack levied by Eumolpus is to be taken seriously as the views of Petronius is the judgment of Atkins<sup>16</sup> and of other scholars to be referred to later.

Arrowsmith is not impressed by the view that the poem is a parody or satire of the *De bello civili* in part because he believes that "the real resemblances between the two poems and some unmistakable repetitions" are in most cases "merely trivial or casual echoes of phrasing, and as such hardly sustain a theory of forceful parody."<sup>17</sup> Also looming large in Arrowsmith's thinking is derogation of Eumolpus, who, he contends, "patently fails to convince us either of his own powers of poetry or of the rightness of his own notions of epic structure."<sup>18</sup> His view of the poet as an obvious type of "the *laudator temporis acti*, praisers of the past and *ipso facto*, decriers of the present,"<sup>19</sup> was anticipated in the judgment of both Dill and Boissier that the "Bellum civile" is an unsuccessful display of literary conservatism and a futile attempt to make worn-out machinery work once more.<sup>20</sup>

To be mentioned also are those, like Ribbeck and Henderson, who have assigned to Petronius a mixture of the various motives already presented for the composition of the poem,<sup>21</sup> and those who would even expunge the selection from the *Satiricon*. In the latter category is Tailhade who in his translation of 1902 omitted

<sup>15</sup> Found on page 57 of volume 16 of *The Works of M. de Voltaire*, translated by T. Smollett, T. Francklin, and others (London 1762).

<sup>16</sup> *Literary Criticism in Antiquity* 2 (Cambridge 1934) 163.

<sup>17</sup> Arrowsmith (above, note 1) 185.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Op. cit.* (above, note 1) 186.

<sup>20</sup> The former in *Roman Society from Nero to Marcus Aurelius* (London 1920), and the latter in *L'Opposition sous les Césars* (Paris 1892).

<sup>21</sup> Ribbeck, *Geschichte der römische Dichtung* 3 (Stuttgart 1913), and Henderson, *Civil War and Rebellion in the Roman Empire* (London 1908).

it among other snatches of verse as interpolations "d'un scholiaste bête." In a preface to that edition, de Boisjolin referred to the poem as an "épisode de hasard, que la déraison du copiste a inséré dans cette aventure."<sup>22</sup>

### III

The authenticity of the "Bellum civile" as a part of the *Satiricon* is established, however, by the textual history of Petronius' work. Significant features of that history are worth examining not so much to prove the authenticity of the poem, which very few have seen fit to question, as to observe the light they may throw on its purpose.<sup>23</sup> The text of the *Satiricon* remained complete as an integral unit scarcely beyond the time of the fall of the Western Empire but suffered dissolution at an early date. The process of dissolution took place in various ways, among them the deliberate extraction of chapters forming complete unities within themselves. Perhaps as early as the Carolingian period, the *Cena Trimalchionis*, the story of the Widow of Ephesus, and the poem on the Civil War had all been removed from the text as a whole and were being circulated independently. It is worth noting that although such abstracted versions of the Widow tale often lacked the name of Petronius, the "Bellum civile" was circulated with his name. One explanation, or possibly a consequence, of the condition (at this distance it is difficult to determine which was the actual state of affairs) may be seen in Peck's information, "The fragment of Petronius *De bello civili* was fairly well known, and was used for reading in the schools."<sup>24</sup> Thus an independent tradition was formed for the poem, the perpetuation or reflection of that tradition being observed in the existence of manuscripts containing only that part of the writings of Petronius.

<sup>22</sup> This survey of the various motives assigned for the inclusion of the "Bellum civile" by no means pretends to be complete. It does not include, for example, beliefs as fantastic as those expressed by Kindt and Butler. The former sees the poem intended as an *apologia* for Caesar. The latter, with more moderation but like failure to impart conviction, observes, "If the work was written at the time when Seneca and Lucan first fell from the Imperial favour, such criticism may well have found favour at Court."

<sup>23</sup> In this task I have drawn heavily on writings, lectures, and notes of the late Evan Taylor Sage, whose untimely death in 1936 interrupted his monumental study of the text of the *Satiricon*. I cannot overestimate the value and helpfulness of the numerous materials which he placed at my disposal.

<sup>24</sup> *A History of Classical Philology* (New York 1911) 246.

In the process of dissolution undergone by the Petronian text, two forms of the text emerged—a longer and a shorter—the distinction between the two being related to the amount of the *Cena Trimalchionis* preserved in each. In both versions of the *Satiricon* the Civil War poem is preserved, that is, in the four editions that constitute the extant representatives of the longer text and also in a far larger number of manuscripts of the shorter text tradition, those designated the *Vulgaria* or *Vulgata Excerpta*.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the poem was known at Auxerre in France during the ninth century, a fact demonstrated by the parallels between Petronius' poem and one written by Heiric concerning the life of St. Germain l'Auxerrois (printed in Buecheler's *editio maior* of Petronius [Berlin 1862]). It was known at the same time at Fleury too, where it probably furnished the model for passages in the *Policraticus* of John of Salisbury.

From the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries the florilegia flourished. In the pages of that treasure-house of quotations appear eight passages from the "Bellum civile," varying in length from two to six verses and in all but one case captioned with a title coined by the compilers of the florilegia. From that source came the quotations of the poem found in two encyclopedias of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries<sup>26</sup> as well as those which appear in compositions by Vincent of Beauvais, Jacobus Magnus, Johannes de Monsterialio, Wilhelmus Britto.

In 1482 the first printed edition of Petronius was issued. Although it was based on a short manuscript and was marked by certain omissions, the "Bellum civile" was included in that edition, as it has been included in every edition of the *Satiricon* thenceforth except the already mentioned translation of Tailhade. The tendency to extract the poem for individual presentation, noted as having taken place as early as the Carolingian period, recurred less than twenty years after the publication of the *editio princeps*. In 1500 Busch published an edition of the Civil War poem alone, and he reprinted the work eight years later. In 1517 Singrenius also published the poem itself and in 1523 issued a reprint. Not until 1575 was a printed edition based on a long manuscript. In that year Tornaesius released an edition based on two such codices. It contained the "Bellum civile," as did

<sup>25</sup> See Baldwin (above, note 6) 247.

<sup>26</sup> See B. L. Ullman, "Petronius in the Mediaeval *Florilegia*," *CP* 25 (1930) 21.

the 1577 and 1580 editions of Pithoeus, who likewise used a long manuscript. Thus by the close of the sixteenth century the poem was unequivocally associated with the *Satiricon* in manuscripts of both varieties and in independent excerpts.

## IV

The commentary appended to the "Bellum civile" in the early reproductions of the poem, in both the manuscripts and the editions, is largely critical, having to do with textual recension. In the three instances where the commentary is by contrast markedly exegetical, the interpretation accorded the poem is worthy of note.

Four manuscripts (Paris. 17903, Escorial Q. 1.14, Paris. 7647, and Atreb. 64) contain the Petronian readings perpetuated in the florilegia, and not every one of the four presents all the citations constituting the sum total of material drawn from the "Bellum civile."<sup>27</sup> The eight passages making up that total are all drawn from portions of the poem in which vices of the Romans are assailed. Furthermore, the caption with which each citation is introduced reflects the concentration of the compilers of the florilegia on Petronius' attack on Roman depravity. They are *De luxuria*, heading lines 32-38, 24-26, 87-89; *De avaritia*, heading lines 40-44 and line 41; *De egestate*, introducing lines 56-57; *De gloria*, referring to lines 61-66; and *De fortuna*, lines 79-81. Four lines of the poem are presented without any caption, lines 90-93. Describing the fervid quest of the Romans for precious stones and luxurious materials in the ground, they too could be headed *De luxuria* or *De avaritia*. Like all the passages quoted in the florilegia, they express tacitly the opinion that the "Bellum civile" was designed primarily as an invective against the depravity characterizing the Rome upon which civil war descended.

That purpose, moreover, is overtly assigned to the poem in two fifteenth-century manuscripts reproducing only it and appending a voluminous amount of interpretative commentary, Codex Dresdensis Dc 141 and Codex Monacensis 23713.<sup>28</sup> The inscription of the first refers to the work as "Satira Petronii poetae sathirici

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Ullman, *loc. cit.* (above, note 26).

<sup>28</sup> They are minutely examined in an unpublished dissertation by the present author, "The Commentaries in the Manuscripts d, k, m of Petronius." See *Abstracts of Theses, University of Pittsburgh Bulletin*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (October 1, 1934), 294-301.

contra uicia Romanorum," and the *titulus* of the second states, "Petronii Arbitri Satyrarum quae ex suis extat sola integra incipit. Fuit hic poeta Claudii Neronis temporibus coetaneus Parsio qui miro artificio in Romanorum auaritiam et luxuriam suis satiris inuectus est." More explicit is the *intentio* or *argumentum* attributed to the poet in both manuscripts: "Reprehendit . . . uitia Romanorum praecipue auaritiam ex qua peruenerunt discordiae primum cum exteris nationibus, deinde cum ciuibus. Tandem libertas rei publicae Romanis per discordiam adempta est. Incipit igitur ab indignatione ut solent satirici, inuectus in eorum auaritiam . . ." (the phrasing of Monacensis 23713, from which that of Dresdensis Dc 141 varies only slightly).

Scholia written throughout the two manuscripts reflect the attitude that the "Bellum civile" was an invective flaying the vices of the Romans. The explanation of Cato as "pro quolibet homine incorrupto," for example, implies that Petronius wished to present the antipathy of the Romans to the one leader free from the blemish of corruption so rampant about him. Moreover, the notes added to explain various points in the arrangements made by Dis and Fortuna disclose that for the scholiasts penning the commentary of these manuscripts, as for the compilers of the florilegia, the "Bellum civile" was no more than a bitter assault upon "uicia Romanorum." It is possibly worth adding that the 1500 edition of the poem published by Busch contains the *incipit* "Petronii Arbitri Saturae, in qua uitia Romanorum reprehenduntur" and that the Singrenius editions introduce the work as "Petronii Arbitri Poetae Insignis Satira in qua acriter uitia insectatur."

v

That this outlook of the purpose of the poem is limited cannot be questioned, but it is not to be put aside as totally unreasonable. In fact, it may well be a link in establishing a rationale for the work which is in accord with other pieces of evidence and which may satisfy critics, like Arrowsmith and Sage, who do not accept the view that no more than a parody of Lucan's *De bello civili* was intended.

A writer criticizing Lucan, as Petronius clearly did in the passage preceding the "Bellum civile" (118), had the subject matter of his poem readily suggested to him by that of the *De bello civili*.

For him to incorporate echoes of that work in his own composition was also natural. That those echoes should suggest a parody of the original is also a predictable consequence. Astute critics, however, have perceived more than parody in the "Bellum civile."<sup>29</sup> Skillfully Petronius chose to combine with his treatment of the Civil War the moral conditions to which he ascribed the blame not only for the war but also for the literary failings upon which he had expatiated in the criticism prefacing the poem. (This last point will be presented in fuller detail below.) That these moral conditions fill over one-fifth of the entire poem and, as Baldwin pointed out, in fullness of detail exceed anything similar in Lucan indicates two significant facts: the concern of the author with more than parody of the *Pharsalia* and the seriousness of his preoccupation with them.

If it seems inconsistent that an attack on moral degeneracy should be the purpose of a writer to whom Tacitus attributed a reputation for conspicuous indolence and skill in the practice of all forms of riotous living (*Annales* 16.18), it should be noted that the display of those qualities may well have been a pose adopted by a man whose conservatism is manifest throughout the *Satiricon*. Not the least of the bases for the ridiculous light in which Trimalchio appeared, for example, was the extravagant luxury characterizing his habits and activities in the whole *Cena* episode. Even the dour and censorious Tacitus spoke approvingly of the practical services performed by Petronius as consul and as proconsul. Only later in his career did he adopt the qualities which led Nero to designate him *arbiter elegantiae*. Once he had attained that post and the reputation accompanying it, it is by no means beyond the realm of probability that he, possessing a sense of humor at once sardonic and puckish, was pleased by the apparent incongruity of invective on moral laxity by one who was himself externally devoted to it in all its facets.

At least two modern authorities have been impressed by the seriousness of Petronius' attack, Friedlaender<sup>30</sup> and Baldwin. The latter, in addition to rejecting the view that the "Bellum civile" was a parody of Lucan,<sup>31</sup> expressed the belief, "Indeed, the

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Sage's edition of the *Satiricon* (New York 1929) 208, and Arrowsmith, (above, note 1) 185.

<sup>30</sup> Bursian's *Jahresbericht* 47 (1886) 196.

<sup>31</sup> *Op. cit.* (above, note 6) 12.



length and the vehemence of the passage, even its overloaded obscurity, may have been due to a warmth of indignation that marred, instead of making, verses. There is nothing in the words which show a desire to ridicule those who professed to say such things in earnest. . . . And there is quite as much probability that Petronius, with his broad if perverse outlook, would sometimes be stirred by such abuses. . . ."<sup>32</sup>

Noteworthy is the fact that an attack on the moral decline of their fellows was a common practice of Roman writers whose conservatism was evident in their linguistic and literary tenets. To cite one example of this tendency, Seneca the Elder listed the luxury of the times as the foremost reason for the low state of contemporary oratory, on the ground that "nihil . . . tam mortiferum ingeniis quam luxuria est" (*Controversiae* 1, praef. 7). The abilities of slothful youth, he added, were dulled by sleep and inactivity and, what was more disgraceful than either, by preoccupation with a host of base pursuits. The same position may be found in Quintilian, *Inst. or.* 2.2.5, among other places. As a matter of fact, the *Satiricon* in its extant form opens with an arraignment of contemporary oratory, the responsibility for the decline of which is attributed not only to the activities in the schools of declamation but also to the moral degeneracy current. In the poem setting forth a regimen of reform required (5), Agamemnon prescribed,

prius mores  
frugalitatis lege poliat exacta,

and proceeded to recommend avoidance of practices such as were deplored by Seneca.

Also, despite the danger of inferring serious theories in a work whose author is often waggish, the literary conservatism of Petronius has been convincingly demonstrated by Sage (both in the *TAPA* article, "Atticism in Petronius," and at several places in his edition of the *Satiricon*). Also to be recalled is Arrowsmith's description, quoted above, of Eumolpus as a "*laudator temporis acti* . . . and *ipso facto* decrier(s) of the present." The same scholar speaks of the poem as "a kind of model or epic in the classical Vergilian manner" and of its author as "surely parodying

<sup>32</sup> *Op. cit.* (above, note 6) 21-22.

a contemporary style.”<sup>33</sup> More to the point is Sage’s contention that Lucan, as a disciple of the Asiatic school, and Petronius, as a demonstrated adherent of Atticism, were certain to disagree in literary principles and affinities.<sup>34</sup> In a selection, therefore, containing imitations of Lucan—imitations which have been clearly established by Heitland and Baldwin, among others—it is not at all unlikely that Petronius chose to attack the conditions which he deemed responsible to some extent at least for the literary decline he lamented and for the prominence of the rhetorical theories to which he was strongly opposed.

<sup>33</sup> *Op. cit.* (above, note 1) 185 and 186.

<sup>34</sup> “Atticism in Petronius,” *TAPA* 46 (1915) 55–57.