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Decent Indecency
The 'Roman' Image of 'Greek' Traditions in Petronius's *Satyricon*

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate how *The Pergamene Youth* and *The Widow of Ephesus* episodes present a stereotypical negative view of ‚Greek tradition' in Roman culture. This analysis shall show how the narrators of these two Milesian tales entertain while the implicit author connects ethical categories and values to the different levels of the complex narrative structure. The question is not what are the Greeks like, but how the author sees the Greeks. The subject of the current study is thus not the Hellas that is open to historical research, but the ideal of Greek culture that was present in Roman minds.

Keywords

Petronius; *Satyricon*; Milesian tales; implicit reader; parody of Greek tradition

There is no greater jest than life itself – implies Petronius's *Satyricon*. Contrary to the heroic epics the *Satyricon* illustrates, or seems to illustrate the mundane side of life, and many of its readers have believed the picture it paints.[1] The characters of the story drift from one comical situation to the next. The reader is invited to laugh at times on strange situations caused by societal differences – communication between different cultural groups, the dialogues of educated and uneducated, the language usage of characters – and on unbelievable stories and superstitions at others.[2] Trimalchio's banquet showcases a unified Greco-Roman culture: images from *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* are depicted alongside scenes from the games organized by Laenas on paintings in the colonnade;[3] Trimalchio has − at least − two libraries, one Greek, one Latin,[4] and quotes from Greek.[5] The comedians perform an *atellana*, the Greek flautist sings in Latin;[6] while the homerists perform in Greek, Trimalchio recites in Latin.[7]

The current study will illustrate how, while in the literary-cultural amalgam of the satire Greek and Roman elements *cannot* be separated, certain episodes of the Satyricon do present a stereotypical negative view of 'Greek tradition' in Roman culture (as illustrated by the negative meaning of the *pergraecari*, *congraecari* verbs in Plautus),[8] through an analysis of the *The Pergamene Youth* and *The Widow of Ephesus* episodes. Following in the footsteps of Conte,[9] this analysis shall illustrate how the narrators of the abovementioned episodes entertain comically and freely, while the second narrative level – the implicit author – connects ethical categories and values to the different levels of the complex narrative structure. He narrates that he narrates that he narrates. The world of the narrator Encolpius seems to unite Graeco-Roman culture perfectly. However, the author's level apparently operates with the Roman idea of a Greek lifestyle in forming the narratives. The question is not what are the Greeks like, but how the author sees the Greeks. The subject of the current study is thus not the Hellas that is open to historical research, but the ideal of Greek culture that was present in Roman minds.

1 I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers as well as Attila Ferenczi for their constructive comments; any remaining mistakes are my own. Christopher Gill (1973: p. 183) states that "his [Petronius's] work represents the whole of human reality."

2 For more detail about the characteristics of the genre and style: Walsh (1970: pp. 1–31); Conte (1999: pp. 453–466); Adamik (2009: pp. 526–534); Morgan (2009); Panayotakis (2009); Slater (2009).

3 Petr. 29.

4 Petr. 48. Petronius's enigmatic sentence runs as follows: *"tres bybliothecas habeo, unam Graecam, alteram Latinam."* On the philological problem see Adamik (2005) and Freudenburg (2017).

5 Petr. 48.

6 Petr. 53.

7 Petr. 59.

8 On these verbs see Segal (1987: pp. 33–35).

9 Cf. Conte (1997); Walsh (1970: pp. ix–xi) sees the whole novel as a comedy. In contrast, Conte (1997) reads the *Satyricon* while taking the ethical opinion of the author into account. Tibor Szepessy (1972), in the Afterword of the Hungarian translation of the *Satyricon* draws the reader's attention to the difficulty of defining the message of the *Satyricon*, be it entertainment or morality.

Academic discourse regards the two episodes mentioned above as Milesian tales.[10] The genre was named after the *Milisiaka* by Aristides. Little is known about the origin of both Milesian tales and their author. Ovid states that Lucius Cornelius Sisenna translated the stories to Latin in the 1st century BC.[11] The common theme of the stories is overheated sexuality. The second most common element is travel: the adventures happen to the narrator in far-away places or he himself only hears of them. Petronius's educated readers would have connected the geographical location – Pergamon and Ephesus – and the erotic nature of the stories to the Aristides-Sisenna tradition.[12] The formulated nature of the text and the traditions of the genre together create a parodistic reading of Greek culture. The two stories present a unique opportunity for this, as the protagonists of both – Eumolpus who claims to be a 'trustworthy philosopher,' and the widow who claims to be a 'modest women' – hide their immorality behind some form of virtue.

The story of *The Pergamene Youth*

Eumolpus remembers his time in Pergamon dearly. His story (Petr. 85–87) begins as any love story would within the realm of love elegies. The man spots the object of his desire, in this case a young boy. Eumolpus is unaffected by the boy's talents or nature of his character. The boy's uniqueness is described only through his beauty. Eumolpus's affection is purely physical. The Greek pederastic relationship between the *erastes* and *eromenos*, evoked by the episode was a public and respected tradition with several cultural and spiritual elements. However, Eumolpus is dishonest from the offset, and is spurred only by lust. He misleads the boy's parents with his fake moralizing and theatrical anger during their shared meals – where they discuss male love. Eventually the parents entrust him with the education of their son. Thus, the beginning of the story evokes Plato's *Symposium*. It is well known that the participants of the Platonic dialogue discuss the nature of Eros, and touch upon homosexual love, and its proper nature. It will be seen that the story of *The Pergamene Youth* can be read as a parody of Plato's *Symposium*, which was the first literary depiction of idealized male love. Eumolpus appears to behave the same way with the boy as any tutor would, however, his motives are different. He accompanies the boy everywhere, but not out of diligence or care, but to protect him from satyrs similar to himself.

Playing the part of a tutor, Eumolpus wins the favour of the boy over three nights and through three gifts. Knowing the boy is awake he begins to pray to Venus:

10 On the origins and stylistic characteristics of Milesian tales see Walsh (1970: pp. 7–13). For further references and the context of Roman literature see Schmeling (2011: pp. 358–359).

11 Ov. *Tr.* 2.443–444.

12 On the fictional ideal reader see Iser (1972).

> "Queen Venus, if I could kiss this boy, without his knowing it, I will give him tomorrow a pair of doves!"[13]

In Plato's Symposium we read the following:

> "For suppose that a youth had a lover he deemed to be wealthy and, after obliging him for the sake of his wealth, were to find himself deceived and no money to be got, since the lover proved to be poor; this would be disgraceful all the same; since the youth may be said to have revealed his character, and shown himself ready to do anyone any service for pelf, and this is not honorable."[14]

Despite his dishonesty, Eumolpus follows the same path as any other Greek *erastes* with his gifts. The reciprocation he receives for his gifts draws the image of an everyday relationship. First, he steals a kiss, then touches the boy, and finally fulfils lust his. Here the sequence is the same, with the exception that the presents and the initial reciprocation are usually given publicly.[15]

On the second evening, Eumolpus is presented with a second chance and prays to Venus once again:

> "If I can handle (*tractavero*) him in a saucy style without his knowing it, I'll give him a pair of th ebest fighting-cocks for his patience (*patienti*)."[16]

The cock is a typical gift between lovers – as is the horse offered on the third night.[17] The 'innocent' kiss of the previous evening has grown to lust. Eumolpus wants more than anything to touch the boy. Connected to the verb *tracto* – which in similar contexts refers to masturbation, kissing, fellatio with regards to the active partner in intercourse[18] – Beazley's term 'up and down position,' which refers to when the *erastes* touches the face of the *eromenos* with one hand and their genitals with the other, should be remembered.[19] The word *patienti* (from *patior*) in this context refers to tolerance of this.[20] The boy upon hearing the offering not only pretends to be asleep, but draws closer to the man.

13 Petr. 85. Quotation from the *Satyricon* are from the Michael Heseltine's translation (revised by E. H. Warmington).

14 Pl. *Smp.* 185a Harold N. Fowler's translation.

15 Dover (1989: R283, R295). The catalogue of the Athenian *Eros* exhibition from 2009 contains ample imagery and the latest academic discourse on the depiction of homosexual relationships, see Stampolidis & Tassoulas (2009: pp. 230–241).

16 Petr. 86. „for his patience" lacks in Michael Heseltine's translation.

17 On the cock: Dover (1989), and vase pictures no R348, R758, R791 and R833, furthermore Ar. *Av.* 707. On the horse: Ar. *Pl.* 153–159, Ach.Tat. 1.7.1. For further typical gifts see Dover (1989: pp. 92–93).

18 Adams (2002: pp. 186–187).

19 Dover (1989: pp. 94–96), furthermore the photo of vase B598.

20 The passive partner during intercourse, cf. Adams (2002: pp. 189–90).

Eumolpus fulfils his lust on the third night, following an impossible – and later unfulfilled – offering.

> "The boy never slept (*obdormivit*) more soundly. So I first filled my hands with his milk-soft breasts, next was glued in a kiss, and then united all my desires into one."[21]

First, he touches the boy, then kisses him, then fulfils his lust. The *obdormio* verb may be a play on words. The boy may 'fall asleep,' or 'spend the night with someone,' both interpretations are possible.[22]

The next morning the boy waits in vain, Eumolpus does not follow through with his final offering. His short explanation is based on the secret nature of their relationship, of which financial questions were also a factor.[23] It is exactly this secrecy that allows Eumolpus to seduce the boy without obstacle. However, the boy cannot accept his lover's answer, and continues to demand the promised gift from Eumolpus after the latter's short walk. With his question the boy breaches his implied agreement with Eumolpus, according to the prayer, the boy should 'realize nothing' of the night's events, and thus, should not know of the present either. At this point the boy becomes a character similar to Eumolpus. He is also led by his own – at this time purely material – interests, and embodies a negative of the Platonic moral ideal mentioned above.

Eumolpus overcomes the boy's disappointment-fuelled resistance over a few days with his self-restraint and well-placed words. Eumolpus's understanding of the situation is accurate inasmuch as the boy would not forgive his secret lover until the promised gift was received. While keeping his desires in check may have been a challenge, through his self-restraint he evoked a neglect-fuelled anxiety in the boy.[24] At this point, the reader is led to believe that the boy is afraid of losing his rich lover, however, it soon transpires that the boy is after more than gifts.

A few days later, betting on the boy's forgiveness, or despair, he launches a second, successful attempt:

> "... I proceeded to beg the boy to be friends again, that he would let me satisfy him, and the sort of things that love delayed make you say."[25]

Eumolpus's reasoning approaches the fulfilment of sexual desires from a typically masculine point of view. His trail of thought is problematic on several levels, as *such* a sexual act not only damages the social reputation of the boy and his self-esteem, but is also

21 Petr. 86.

22 Adams (2002: pp. 177–178). True, the *cum* preposition is missing, however, the *Nunquam altiore somno ephebus obdormivit* sentence (and the following) seem to support this meaning, if only indirectly.

23 The different forms of the verb *sentio* in each of the three prayers also illustrates the secretive nature of their relationship.

24 In this scene Eumolpus's *enkrateia* does not suppress his desires – as it should – but satisfies them; his self-control appears as control over others. On *enkrateia* see Foucault (1985: pp. 63–77).

25 Petr. 87.

an extreme form of sexual exploitation. J. N. Adams considers Eumolpus's statement that the boy takes him back to satisfy him completely implausible and absurd.[26] This is because in antiquity, the sexual act was always considered more enjoyable for the active partner.[27] First, the boy does not consent and threatens Eumolpus with waking his father, should Eumolpus not let him sleep. Once he consents, his insatiability reverses the usual roles and becomes a source of humour. While he remains the passive partner, he is the more active of the two, he desires the other more, which angers Eumolpus:

> "Do it again, if you like." "Do you want anything?" "Why aren't we doing it?"[28]

Eumolpus's anger creates a frame narrative in the episode. At the beginning, he fakes anger to ingratiate himself with the boy's parents, and at the end the insatiability of his lover provokes true anger. He threatens the boy with his own words, which not only a short while before the boy had thrown so arrogantly at him: "Go to sleep, or I'll tell your father at once!"[29]

The frame narrative is further emphasized by the 'resurfacing' of Plato's *Symposium*. The end of the episode may remind the reader of the scene from the *Symposium* in which Alcibiades tells the story of how he unsuccessfully attempted to woo Socrates.[30] By appearing as a philosopher before the parents at the beginning of the episode at their shared banquets, Eumolpus's nostalgic reflection parodizes not only the ideals of Plato's *Symposium*, but a certain episode of the dialogue itself.

The jovial, refreshingly amoral style of Eumolpus's narration automatically provokes moral tension. Naturally, a reading that concentrates on the characteristics of the novel as a genre and their effects on the work, cannot *directly* inquire as to the nature of the ethical response a reader would have on reading such an episode. However, the question can be examined indirectly, as the story is doubly provocative. On the one hand, it degrades the Socratic ideal of male love to the mundane world of the satire. Where nothing more is left of them than deceit and appearances, and to reinforce the effect it evokes the ideals of the *Symposium* as a counterpoint. Furthermore, the episode destroys the male ideal of the Roman elite – one that was not foreign to Classical Greek culture either. In Roman culture it was reproachable and humiliating for a free man to succumb to the desires of another.[31] The man must be the active partner, otherwise he loses his dignity, his *pudicitia*.[32] In this case the man was given different qualifiers – *impudicus,*

26 Adams (2002: p. 197). In comparison to Dover's theory, this position cannot be brought into question.

27 Xen. *Smp* 8.21, Pl. *Ps.* 783–787, Luc. *Am.* 27. cited by Habermehl (2006: p. 110).

28 Petr. 87.

29 Petr. 87.

30 Pl. *Smp.* 216c–219e.

31 While male homoerotic love is considered a Greek phenomenon, the condemnation of the passive partner in the act was common in the period. Examples for the denouncement of *kinaidia* from Aristophanes' comedies and Athenian rhetoric were collected by Dover (1989: pp. 75ff).

32 For an overview of Roman sexuality, see Skinner (1997). For more detail on Roman homosexuality, see Williams (2010); about *pudicitia*, see Langlands (2009).

pathicus, cinaedeus[33] – or, as happened with C. Julius Caesar, they became the subject of speeches and satirical songs:[34]

"Caesar had his way with Gaul;
Nicomedes had his way with Caesar:
Behold now Caesar, conqueror of Gaul, in triumph,
Not so, Nicomedes, conqueror of Caesar."[35]

One of the most well-known examples of such was the case of Trebonius,[36] who served under Caius Lusius, Caius Marius's cousin, in 101 BC. The *Tribune,* Lusius approached his subordinate, Trebonius, several times. The young man continually rejected his superior's approaches, until one day Lusius invited Trebonius to his tent, and attempted to rape him. To protect his decency, Trebonius killed Lusius with his sword. In front of the court martial Trebonius openly acknowledges his deed, and honestly testifies about the events and Lusius's previous advances. Out of respect for Trebonius's irreproachable behaviour Marius not only acquits him but decorates the young soldier, despite the fact that he killed his cousin.

Trebonius's story resurfaces in the works of several authors,[37] often as a parable, and all writers agree with Marius' decision. In a memorable argumentation, Cicero traces the rightfulness of the killing to the Laws of the Twelve Tables:

> "The Twelve Tables, moreover, laid down that a thief caught at night might be killed with impunity whatever the circumstances, and likewise one caught by day if he put up an armed resistance. So who can possibly maintain that any act of killing, whatever the circumstances, deserves punishment, when sometimes the laws themselves hold out a sword to us for the killing of a fellow man? If, then, there are circumstances (and there are many) in which it is lawful to kill a fellow man, then in situations in which a violent attack is violently resisted, killing is obviously not only right, but unavoidable. A military tribune in the army of Gaius Marius, a relation of his in fact, once sexually assaulted a fellow soldier. The soldier killed him: decent young man that he was, he preferred to risk punishment rather than submit to humiliation. And the great Marius freed him from his danger by acquitting him of the crime."[38]

33 Other modifiers found in commentaries are: *intercutitus*, *scultimidonus*. In detail, see Williams (2010: pp. 191–197).

34 Suet. *Jul.* 53.3.

35 Suet. *Jul.* 49.4. Catharine Edwards' translation.

36 Langlangs (2009: pp. 265–275); Williams (2010: pp. 118–122); Phang (2001: pp. 262–295). Provides a detailed review of homosexuality within the Roman army. She states that no one complained about intercourse with prostitutes or slaves. However, contrary to this, affairs between soldiers were forbidden and punishable. Towards the end of the Republic and in the early days of the Principate written and unwritten rules may have been more permissive but there is no definitive proof of this. In the later days of the Principate the Roman elite was uninterested in the love affairs of provincial soldiers.

37 Calp. *Decl.* 3, Cic. *Inv.* 2. 124, Cic. *Mil.* 9, Plu. *Mar.* 14, Plu. *Mor.* 202b–c, Quint. *Inst.* 3.11.14, [Quint.] *Decl.* 3, V. Max. 6.1.12.

38 Cic. *Mil.* 9. Dominic H. Berry's translation.

The humorous story of *The Pergamene Youth* seems even more provocative in light of the example set by Trebonius. Eumolpus's and Trebonius's behaviour are the two extremes of the same ethical and societal set of norms. Eumolpus embodies the negatives of human nature, characteristics that are unacceptable to the respectable ethical norms of a Roman citizen. The whole of the *Satyricon* brings the Roman view of homosexuality into question, but this is the only episode in which a free man is the victim. The joking, humorous tone of the narrator may have drawn an ethical judgement from its Roman reader, or scornful laughter.

Considering the fact that the *Satyricon* itself often evokes Roman moralizing tradition (the critique of luxury, emasculation, hedonism, materialism, dishonesty, etc. and connecting these traits to the condition of the Roman state), the reader may find it problematic that the first-person narrator himself does not conform to the norms of this tradition. Or the same may be considered a parody of the moralizing tradition.[39] If an 'immoral' person (a cheat, male-whore) begins to moralize, the foundations of the morality are shaken, and its viewpoint is brought into question as well. This may cause the reader to formulate a higher authority (in this case the implied author), who condemns the stories, and to whom the reader can gravitate to for ethical guidance. Even though this connection may not be based on the same grounds as that prescribed by the traditions of Roman moralizing literature. It is not the old Cato that should be found in Petronius and his reader but rather a literary method that meets the requirements of *delectare* and *docere* through questioning the authenticity of both the delight (here: humour) and teaching (here: moralizing).

The story of *The Widow of Ephesus*

Before beginning an analysis of the section in question (Petr. 111–112) it is worth noting two later sections of the text, which illustrate the importance of funerals and burial, and the question of what happens to our bodies after death, in Petronius's work. The text of note is only a few *caput*s after the story of the widow in modern editions.[40] Following a shipwreck a group of survivors find the corpse of Lichas, the owner of the boat. The man who was only a few hours ago the owner of everything around them has become a lifeless body thrown around by the waves. The sight moves Encolpius to meditate on the mortality of human life in a specifically Epicurean way:

> "You tell me that for those the waters whelm there is no burial. As if it mattered how our perishable flesh comes to its end, by fire or water or the lapse of time! Whatever you may do, all these things achieve the same goal. But beasts will tear the body, you say, as though fire would give it a more kindly welcome! When we are angry with our slaves, we consider burning their

39 On the question "was Petronius a moralist?" see Connors (1998: p. 12).

40 The story of *The Widow of Ephesus* can be found in *caput*s 111–112. The episode in question in *caput* 115. There is a – presumably small – *lacuna* between the two texts, thus it is unknown how long the text that separated the two was.

> heaviest punishment. Then what madness to take such trouble to prevent the grave from leaving aught of us behind!"[41]

The quoted passage is from the opening lines of the episode that plays out in Croton. The text of the whole novel ends with a speech in which Eumolpus urges his inheritors to eat from his body to earn their inheritance.[42] Thus, worry over the fate of one's body is a recurring theme. How can the following episode be read in this respect?

The key to the story of *The Widow of Ephesus* is *pudicitia*, as mentioned in connection with the previous episode, however its focus is feminine. Petronius introduces the story as follows:

> "There was a married woman in Ephesus of such famous virtue (*pudicitiae*) that she drew women even from the neighbouring states to gaze upon her."[43]

The text implies that the widow gained respect for her *pudicitia*, her modesty, not with her way of life but for how she grieved her husband. Grief and mourning are rites of passage transitional rites that can be found in all cultures. A special world forms for the mourners and the dead, which is somewhere between the worlds of the living and the dead. The time of mourning cannot be defined as it is deeply rooted in the nature of the relationship between the mourners and the deceased, and the sensitivity and mentality of the mourners. Everyone leaves this special area, when they are ready to finally part from the deceased. Grief is nothing but the closing of one chapter of life, and preparation for 'reintegration' into society.[44]

> "So when she had buried her husband, the common fashion of following the procession with loose hair, and beating the naked breast in front of the crowd, did not satisfy her. She followed the dead man even to his resting-place, and began to watch and weep night and day over the body, which was laid in an underground vault in the Greek fashion (*Graeco more*)."[45]

The pulling or cutting of hair is an important element of many rites the passage transitional rituals. While pounding or beating the chest illustrates pain.[46] The excerpt below illustrates how the period of grief cannot be defined:

41 Petr. 115.

42 Petr. 141.

43 Petr. 111.

44 Gennep (2004: pp. 147–148).

45 Petr. 111.

46 As anthropological research has shown: Gennep (2004: pp. 166–167). On mourning see Luc. *Luct*; Sen. *Ep.* 63. On Greek traditions, with ample text and imagery see Dillion (2003: pp. 268–292) and Roilos (2012) on comparative methods and perspectives citing mostly medieval sources; on Romans see Hope (2009: pp. 121–149).

> "Neither her parents nor her relations could divert her from thus torturing herself, and courting death by starvation; the officials were at last rebuffed and left her; every one mourned for her as a woman of unique character, and she was now passing her fifth day without food."[47]

A characteristic element of mourning is starvation – which often results in death – and the lack of cleanliness. Both characteristics appear either directly or indirectly in the episode.[48]

In the period marriages were more often political or financial, rather than amorous. However, if a marriage was romantic in nature, self-sacrifice, or suicide in some cases was not rare.[49] Petronius stresses the unquestionable modesty of the widow again to emphasise his earlier statements:

> "There was but one opinion throughout the city, every class of person admitting this was the one true and brilliant example of chastity and love (*pudicitiaea morisque exemplum*)."[50]

The turning point of the story is the appearance of the soldier ordered to guard the crucified–bandits. Gareth Schmeling believes the love of the soldier and window is predestined from the moment the soldier appears. One night the soldier hears sobbing and sees some light coming from amongst the graves.[51] As he enters the crypt he sees a beautiful woman – ... *visaque pulcherrima muliere*... "... seeing a very beautiful woman..."[52] This is the first point in the episode where the woman's beauty and not modesty is emphasized. The soldier at first believes he is seeing a ghost. On seeing the corpse, he understands the reality. The man's motives seem honest at this point. He feels sorry for the grieving woman. He wants to share his dinner with her, and tries to comfort her. His consoling words, however – at first, or seemingly – result in a reaction opposite to their intention. Pounding her chest even harder, the widow throws her torn hair onto the corpse. However, this grief may be considered illusory, as the act of throwing cut hair on the corpse or the grave is not only a sign of respect, but the symbolic ending of a relationship. While the widow still resists the soldier here, the act distances her from

47 Petr. 111.

48 To mention only on example in Apuleius's *Metamorphoses* Charite does not bathe and plans to starve herself, to follow her husband, Tlepolemus as soon as possible (Apul. *Met.* 8.7.). Later, Thrasyllus learning of Charite's death starves himself to follow the beloved woman (Apul. *Met.* 8.14). For further examples see Hooff (1990: pp. 41–47).

49 The most well-known example may be Portia, Brutus's widow. Several classical authors claim that she committed suicide by swallowing a burning piece of coal, when she learnt of her husband's death cf. App. *BC.* 4.136.574, D.C. 47.49.3, V. Max. 4.6.5. However, others claim she took her own life before her husband's death because of an illness, cf. Plu. *Brut.* 53, Cic. *ad Brut.* 1.9.2, 1.17.7. For further examples see Hope (2009: pp. 141–144). Porcia's death influenced the authors of later eras as well. To mention the most commonly known example, she appears in Shakespeare, cf. *Iulius Caesar*, Act 4, Scene 3. (As Shakespeare knew the works of Plutarch well, Portia dies before her husband.)

50 Petr. 111.

51 Schmeling (2011: p. 429). The widow guards her dead husband, the soldier guards the crucified prisoners. Schmeling considers this episode to be a paraphrase of the *Aeneid*.

52 Petr. 111.

her husband and opens an avenue for the soldier.[53] After further consolation the widow stops fasting, and accepts the food offered by the soldier. The soldier's devious words have reached their goal: the woman wants to live. He then moves on and targets the widow's modesty with his compliments. The widow finds the man increasingly appealing, handsome and smooth-tongued. Words lead to actions; the pair spend three nights together. The man gives the woman everything he can. However, during one night of their 'honeymoon' the parents of one of the crucified men realize his body is unguarded and cut their son from the cross to bury him. When the soldier realizes what has happened, he immediately tells the widow and adds that he would rather take his own life for his negligence, than wait for judgement. He turns to the widow with a morbid request. To allow her lover and husband to rest together. The following words from Petronius make the whole situation even more morbid:

> "The lady's heart was tender as well as pure. 'Heaven forbid,' she replied, 'that I should look at the same moment on the dead bodies of two men whom I love. No, I would rather make a dead man useful, than send a live man to death'."[54]

The contrast between the women's kindness and modesty in this situation are emphatically parodistic. The widow faces an impossible position, an aporia. She has dishonoured the memory and resting place of her husband, by making love to another man in the crypt. Nevertheless, when she has finally finished grieving her husband, she will lose her new lover. The woman finally decides to crucify the body of her dead husband, in place of the missing man. The act saves a life, but desecrates a dead man: "...the people wondered the next day by what means the dead man had ascended the cross."[55]

Throughout Roman history inhumation and cremation were both common forms of burial. However, different periods had different preferences. From the 1st century BC to the 1st century A.D. cremation was preferred by the Roman elite.[56] Cicero explains the reasons for this in his work *De Legibus* as follows:

> "I myself believe that the most ancient form of burial was that which, according to Xenophon, was decreed by Cyrus for himself. The corpse is consigned to the earth, placed and laid out as if it were covered by its mother's blanket. We are told that our own King Numa was buried in the same fashion in that grave which is not far from the altar of Fons; and we know that the Cornelian clan has employed this type of burial up to our own time. The remains of Gaius Marius, which were resting in peace, were scattered on the waters of the Anio on the instructions of the victorious Sulla. If he had been as wise as he was fierce, he would not have been

53 Hom. *Il.* 23.127–153, A. *Ch.* 1–9, S. *El.* 51–53, E. *IT.* 143–177. Anthropological studies have classified the act as ending a marriage. Gennep (2004: pp. 166–167).

54 Petr. 112.

55 Petr. 112.

56 On Roman burial see Morris (1996: pp. 31–69); Hope (2009 with emphasis on pp. 80–85).

> incensed with such bitter hatred. I'm inclined to think it was for fear that this might happen to himself that Sulla was the first of the patrician Cornelii to instruct that his body be cremated."[57]

Pliny similarly writes:

> "Cremation is not a long-established practice among the Romans: originally, they buried their dead. However, cremation was introduced after it became known that the bodies of those who had fallen while fighting in far-off lands were disinterred. Even so, many families have preserved the old practices: for instance, no one in the Cornelian family was cremated before Sulla, who feared retaliation for his disinterment of the body of C. Marius."[58]

The practice became so common among the Roman elite that Tacitus notes the following regarding Poppaea's funeral:

> "Her body was not cremated, the normal Roman practice. It was embalmed, after the fashion of foreign royalty, by being filled with aromatic spices, and then taken into the Mausoleum of the Julii."[59]

Petronius could not have found a better genre for these two episodes then that of Milesian tales, as in these stories sooner or later the reader always finds that the "no man's honesty, and no woman's virtue are unassailable."[60] The implied author is easily separated from the narrator of the stories. While the narrator jovially tells the stories that are distasteful within the traditional set of norms, the decision of the implied author to distance himself from the narrator makes this distaste or disgust perceptible, when he offers a means of comparing the unbecoming new world, with traditional Roman norms.

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57 Cic. *Leg.* 2.56–57. Niall Rudd's translation.

58 Plin. *Nat.* 7.187. Mary Beagon's translation.

59 Tac. *Ann.* 16.6. John C. Yardley's translation.

60 Walsh (1970: p. 11).

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