

DAY OF PAPERS TALK

Petronius' Poem on Julius Caesar and the Civil War

Most of my attention this year has been given to a 295-line poem on Caesar's Civil War. It appears in the *Satyricon*, one of the few examples we have of an ancient Roman novel, written by Gaius Petronius in the time of Nero. I say "novel", but the *Satyricon* almost defies that kind of classification. One of its most interesting features is its prosimetric form—that is, it is a mixture of prose and verse: mainly prose, but with bits of verse stuck in. Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis* is similarly structured. Works such as these are sometimes referred to as Menippean satires, after a Greek named Menippus, who seems to have written in the same style.

Okay, so it's interesting to see this mixture of prose and poetry in the *Satyricon*, but why focus on this particular poem? why a 295-line poem on the Civil War? It's certainly the most commented-upon poem in the *Satyricon*—perhaps because it is the longest. Most of the verse sections in the *Satyricon* are only a handful of lines long—as I said, this one is nearly three hundred lines. Also, most of the poems are directly related to what is going on in the plot. Often you will have an episode described in prose, followed by a poem which then captures the essence or theme of that episode. Sometimes dialogue and even the plot itself is delivered in verse. But the poem on the Civil War... is a poem on the Civil War—it has nothing to do with what is going on in the rest of the story. So perhaps more than its length, I think that what makes this particular poem so interesting is the fact that it is presented as a poem in its own right, independent of the framing narrative.

I should briefly explain the occasion for the poem's recital, and summarize its plot. It is recited by a character who is himself a poet. His name is Eumolpus, which has an ironical Greek meaning—it means 'sweet-singer'. But earlier on in the story we have already seen Eumolpus get pelted with stones and ejected from different venues for reciting his verse in public, so it's not with great expectations that we embark on his next poem.

Eumolpus, the narrator of the *Satyricon* as a whole, and a couple of other hangers-on have just been shipwrecked, and they have to make a journey from the site of the wreck to the nearest town. The poem, then, fulfills a traditional purpose of story-telling, which is to while away a long journey. Of course, Petronius could have simply "cut to" their arrival in the town, skipping out the journey altogether; or else he could filled it some other way. While he hasn't had much praise for his **poetry** so far, Eumolpus has, earlier in the narrative, delivered two amusing prose tales, so there was ample room here to do something of that sort instead. Or even if a poem was in order: why a poem on the Civil War? Nowhere else is this type of political or historical issue raised—the *Satyricon* is a **social** commentary, if it's a commentary at all.

Well, these questions make the poem which we do have that much more interesting. And since it is a substantial poem, and presented **as** a poem, it's able to bear a certain amount of scrutiny in its own right. Many who have looked at the poem, however, do not afford it that scrutiny before interpreting its relevance to the rest of the text. Because of Eumolpus' portrayal and characterization so far, it is easy to become prejudiced by the time he comes to deliver his mini-epic on the Civil War. It's easy to write the poem off as a kind of farce.

But Eumolpus seems to **demand** a certain degree of scrutiny, for he prefaces his poem with a discourse on what good poetry ought to be.

[This is the first part of the handout.]

In his preface Eumolpus declares his models to be Homer, Vergil, Horace and the lyric poets. He recommends refined diction and free inspiration. He calls what will be his subject matter *thebelli civilis opus ingens*—a weighty topic not to be dealt with in terms of mere historical facts, but to be imbued with the influence of the gods, in the manner of the *Aeneid* and the works of Homer.

And indeed, in the poem which follows

[of which I've given the first few lines in the next part of the handout]

Eumolpus sticks to his principles and produces a plot divided quite evenly between the divine and mortal spheres.

The poem begins with a description of Rome as a global conqueror, but sunk in decadence. After a few variations on this theme we cut to the Phlegraean fields, a volcanic region near Naples, associated with the underworld. Nearby, of course, is Cumae, where lived the Sibyl who showed Aeneas the way to the underworld in *Aeneid* book six.

At this midway-point between the realms of the living and of the dead, the gods Dis and Fortuna are introduced. Dis is eager for more souls and makes the case for civil war. He appeals to Fortuna, since it was by her that Rome came to power, only to squander her fortune in decadence. But Fortune is also a fickle deity, addicted to change, and so Dis

also appeals to her desire to never see power seated in one place for too long. Fortuna makes a speech agreeing with Dis and sets her face for war.

We then cut to the Alps, which Caesar is crossing with his army. Eumolpus plays a little loose with the facts here, but it is perhaps for poetic effect. It was of course the crossing of the Rubicon which represented Caesar's irrevocable action—but here it is the Alps. The effect is to draw upon other characters associated with crossing the Alps, namely Hercules, and Hannibal. A richly ambiguous characterization of Caesar arises from this: he is as heroic as Hercules on the one hand but possibly as dangerous to Rome as Hannibal on the other.

Back at Rome, *Fama*, spreads the news of Caesar's approach. Eumolpus then describes the exodus from the city. Finally, we switch back to the divine plane, where, just like in the Iliad, the gods and goddesses are choosing their sides before battle.

The divine figure who is to oversee the whole ordeal is Discordia, fittingly. She ascends the Appenine to get a good view, and then, after 294 lines of preliminaries, the whole of the actual Civil War itself is captured in the final line of the poem:

factum est in terris quicquid Discordia iussit.

Whatever Discordia commanded was played out in the world.

At the end of all this we get a weary remark from the narrator of the Satyricon, who has just listened to the whole poem—he says: “When Eumolpus had finished pouring this out in a huge overflowing of words,

we finally reached our destination.”

But as I mentioned before, I don't think we should let the reactions of characters within the story tell us too much about the quality of the verse. So my first task was to set about evaluating this poem on the Civil War in a more objective way than had perhaps been taken before.

Pretty quickly I realized what I'd gotten myself into, of course: I was to set out the rules by which a good poem can be discerned from a bad one.

Well, I did take English 202—Modern Poetry, but that hardly turns one into the ultimate arbiter of quality verse. And deciding whether a poem is good or bad is hard enough when it is in English, let alone when it's in Latin and two thousand years old.

No, making an authoritative judgement on the poem was out of the question. But, while a good poem is certainly more than the sum of its parts, those parts do bear looking at. So what I did was to read through the poem closely and note wherever I could interesting uses of language, of metre, and of imagery.

The conclusion which I reached is that the poem actually has many qualities, in spite of several deficiencies. Altogether it seems neither good nor bad poetry.

I should note that this is not a particularly novel conclusion. My work served only to substantiate this take on the poem by providing a detailed analysis of its qualities and deficiencies.

To give you an idea of what I am talking about, I thought I'd give an

example of a couple of Eumolpus' peaks and a couple of his troughs.

I have already alluded to one example. It might be called a defect of the poem that there are historical inaccuracies, such as the misplacing of Caesar's transgression from the site of the Rubicon to that of the Alps. But in his prefatory comments Eumolpus admits that poetical effect is more important than factual accuracy, so on this point he is true to his principles. If something is gained by bending the truth, then it becomes a virtue rather than a defect.

Similarly, the compression of the whole poem, so that the actual fighting of the war is confined to a single line might be seen as defect: how can it be a poem on the civil war when it doesn't even describe the civil war?

But what Eumolpus has done is to throw emphasis onto the causes for war. The whole opening section, and the speeches of Dis and Fortuna, focus on the overwhelming excess of Rome. The sense we get is that Rome had expanded to the point that she could no longer wage external wars, and was forced to turn in on herself. In this case the actual fighting of the war was a foregone conclusion—Eumolpus draws our attention to the more relevant **cause** of the war by focusing on the moments leading up to its outbreak.

Another example is on the point of metre. A poet can convey a lot through variations of metre, but the consensus has been that Eumolpus' versification is rather repetitive and mechanical. In the words of one commentator, he "has wrought his verses with a heavy hand. They are correct and vigorous but often monotonous and unmusical, and create an impression of having been hammered out with careful regard to the

fundamental rules, but without much feeling for subtler effects or perception of the variety of treatment which might be achieved within them.”

This commentator and others note a strong preference for a *caesura* in the third or fourth foot of the hexameter. An example is in the third line of the poem,

nec satiatus erat, where there is a sense end (a full stop) in the middle of the third metrical foot. When this practice becomes repetitive, the rhythm is indeed monotonous.

But even when rigorously sticking to the rules and not indulging in hiatus, excessive elision, monosyllabic verse endings, or hypermetric lines, one can still do interesting things metrically.

My example for this is the versification of the speeches of Dis and Fortuna.

Dis' speech is weighed down with many long and heavy syllables.

[handout]

His appearance from the depths of the underworld sets the tone in three spondaic lines:

76 Has inter sedes Ditis pater extulit ora
77 bustorum flammis et cana sparsa fauilla,
78 ac tali uolucrum Fortunam uoce laccessit:

the words *tali ... uoce*, besides introducing the speech itself, also introduce the tone of the speech, for the first line is a solemn, almost formal address to Fortuna, and it is another long heavy line:

rerum humanarum diuinarumque potestas,

The question which he then asks Fortuna in lines 82–83 demonstrates a neat metrical variation across two lines:

82 ecquid Romano sentis te pondere uictam,
83 nec posse ulterius perituram extollere molem?

the first line, 82, is spondaic, that is, heavy and long, and you will notice that the sense of the line dwells upon the weight of Rome's excess: "Do you feel, Fortuna, that you are weighed down by a Roman burden?" The versification neatly mirrors the sense.

In the next line, 83, Dis asks whether Fortuna can any longer support a *perituram ... molem*, a mass which is about to collapse. Here you will notice there are two elisions in the line—the words slip into one another, just as the great bulk of Rome is on the point of collapse.

Dis continues to speak in long heavy syllables. In his speech about two-thirds of the feet are spondees, that is two long syllables, and only one-third are dactylls, that is, long-short-short.

He closes his speech with an awkward attempt to join hands with Fortuna, but his movement causes a sort of chasm in the earth:

100 Haec ubi dicta dedit, dextrae coniungere dextram

101 conatus, rupto tellurem soluit hiatu.

This is quite a striking image, and again, line 101 is a spondaic line, long and yawning, like the very rupture it describes.

The weighed-down speech of Dis is then followed by Fortuna's reply, which is by contrast light and bouncy. Again, in the introduction of the speech there is a hint to what the nature of the metre will be:

102 Tunc Fortuna leui defudit pectore uoces:

leui pectore in line 102 refers primarily to Fortuna's famously fickle nature. She changes her mind at whim; she has a "light heart". But the same words also describe the versification of her speech, for, while Dis' speech was two-thirds spondees and only one-third dactyls, for Fortuna the ratios are inverted: two-thirds of the feet in her speech are dactyls, one-third spondees.

This creates an effective contrast between the nature of the two speeches, and the two speakers. Eumolpus, or Petronius, if you like, has, contrary to the prevailing opinion, put in some thought here for gaining an effect by varying his versification.

The final point I would like to make is on the clever use of language. There are several instances of wordplay in the poem. Some are simple, and not necessarily poetic.

[the next example on the handout]

sunt qui coniugibus maerentia pectora iungant at line 229 plays on the derivation of *coniunx*: “some join themselves to those with whom they are joined in marriage.” that is a fairly simple example,

[and the next]

fax stellis comitata nouis incendia, from line 139 plays on the well known etymology of the word for a comet: *comitata*, refers to the fact that the tail of a comet looks like hair streaming back.

But Eumolpus delivers other examples of wordplay which are more pointed than simple puns because they contribute an additional hint of foreboding to their context.

The “useless uses” *uanos ... usus* (92) which Romans find for construction materials point up the paradox of Roman excess.

The German blood which Caesar has spilt in his last campaign, and which is still spattered upon his men, *Germano perfusas sanguine turmas* 214, foreshadows the germane, or brotherly, blood to be spilt in the Civil War, punning on the adjectives *Germanus/germanus*.

Finally, Discordia’s exhortation at the end of the poem that Pompey seek the walls of Epidamnus *Epidamni moenia quaere* (293) has the foreboding implication that Pompey is *damnatus*, damned.

These are only a few examples of the kind of thing I found. I think they demonstrate that if you ignore preconceptions and take a closer look at this poem you come out with a much different idea of its worth.

Not that this makes this poem any the less perplexing. In some ways it would be easier if the poem **was** unambiguously poor. In that case we could simply say it contributes to the characterization of Eumolpus as a terrible and pretentious poetaster. We could even consider it a damning parody of Lucan.

Or if the poem was unambiguously **good**, we could praise the work as the fulfillment of the poet's preface, or even a "correction" of Lucan. But while I have demonstrated some of this poem's merits, it does still have serious defects, especially repetition and monotony, so that we cannot say Eumolpus has really succeeded. He is certainly not at the level of the models he supposedly adopts (Vergil, Homer, Horace)

No, the poem is neither a completely good nor completely poor attempt. In fact, it is almost obstinately mediocre, with its tongue in its cheek.

But then this is exactly the tone of the Satyricon on the whole. In my thesis I argue that many of the theories explaining the purpose of this poem make the mistake of either condemning it too much or praising it too much.

At first the appearance of this rather long poem on a rather unrelated topic is quite puzzling, but I now see it as quite in keeping with the rest of the Satyricon.

The length and tediousness are easily explained. Petronius relishes the thought of making the reader suffer alongside the travellers.

And the subject of the Civil War is not really so anomalous, because we have seen that Eumolpus actually says very little about the war itself.

What it does focus on is the lamentable state of society which caused the war to happen—and the decline of society is a theme to which Petronius' characters often return.