

CIRCE IN PETRONIUS *SAT.* 126, 1–139, 4

by

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ABSTRACT: Circe, named after Homer's sorceress and pictured in the *Satyricon*, is one of the most famous, intriguing and ambiguous characters in ancient Roman literature. Her vain intercourse with Encolpius in Petronius' romance has been investigated in various ways. The author dares to add some remarks, arguing that this sexual unfulfillment may also have been caused by a social and artistic gap created *ad hoc* between the two lovers.

Among the literary works of the Neronian period, only some fragments from Books XV and XVI of Petronius' *Satyricon* have survived, although the whole work was probably quite extensive¹. Nevertheless it is generally assumed that Petronius' novel was a brilliant work of real genius, showing unrestrained sexuality without any respect as to age or gender².

The created world of the *Satyricon* was too masculine to admit a female. This aspect can be treated as a sample of Petronius' parody of epos with its masculine and maybe homoerotic ethos, as we recall e.g. the special feeling between Achilles and Patroclus in Homer³. And yet female characters do appear in the *Satyricon* several times and in various disguises. If we were to count

¹ Cf. HARRISON 1999: XII, especially, if we assume that the author had in mind to create a comic rewriting of Homer's epos, cf. MORGAN 2009: 34.

² One should have in mind here a controversial scene of intercourse between the boy Giton and a very fresh girl (26), and also the erotic scene with an old man and a teenager (140, 1–11). References by numbers alone are to Petronius' *Satyricon* (cited throughout the paper in the edition by F. BÜCHELER, Berolini 1904).

³ Cf. Book XXIII of the *Iliad* with Achilles' exceptionally great grief after his friend's death. The question concerning possible homoeroticism in Homer has long been discussed, see the interpretation in Plato *Symp.* 180 A; cf. CONSTAN 1997: 37–42; LAGUNA-MARISCAL, SANZ-MORALES 2005; FANTUZZI 2012. So we should not go too far in interpreting the scene of imperfect embracing a shadow of Patroclus by his younger friend as an element of a possible erotic connection between them (Hom. *Il.* XXIII 99 ff.). We may find some examples of vain embracing a ghost by a living human being without any sexual context, e.g. Hom. *Od.* XI 204 ff. (Odysseus and his mother), Verg. *Aen.* VI 700 ff. (Aeneas and his father), and it is worth noticing the triple attempt at hugging in almost