

T. PETRONIUS ARBITER (? - A.D. 66)

Petronius was the reputed author of the *Satyricon*, a literary portrait of Roman society of the 1st century A.D. Seneca criticized him as a pleasure-seeker who "turned night into day".

Petronius was a man of pleasure and of good literary taste who flourished in the times of Claudius (A.D. 41-54) and Nero (A.D. 54-68). As Tacitus describes him, he used to sleep by day and attend to official duties or to his amusements by night. At one time he was governor of the province Bithynia in Asia Minor and was also consul, showing himself to be a man of action when required. Later he lapsed into indulgence and, after his consulship, was received by Nero into his most intimate circle as his *arbiter elegantiae* ("director of elegance"), whose word on all matters of taste was law. Petronius was alleged to be involved with the conspiracy of Piso against Nero. Though innocent, he was arrested at Cumae in southern Italy. He did not wait for the inevitable sentence but committed suicide (A.D. 66).

The *Satyricon*, or *Satyricon liber* ("Book of Satyrlike Adventures"), is a comic, picaresque novel that is related to several ancient literary genres. It relates the wanderings and escapades of a disreputable trio of adventurers, the narrator Encolpius ("Embracer"), his friend Ascyltos ("Scot-free"), and the boy Giton ("Neighbor"). The surviving portions represent about one-tenth of the complete work. The novel encloses as an independent tale the famous "Widow of Ephesus". Other features recall the "Menippean" satire: a mixture of prose and verse.

The longest and the best episode in the surviving portions of the *Satyricon* is the *Cena Trimalchionis*, or "Banquet of Trimalchio". This is a description of a dinner party given by Trimalchio, an immensely rich and vulgar freedman (former slave), to a group of friends and hangers-on. Trimalchio is the classic example of the parvenu, a figure familiar enough in ancient satirical literature, but especially so in the 1st century A.D., when freedmen as a class were at their most influential.

The aim of the *Satyricon* was evidently above all to entertain by portraying certain aspects of contemporary society. This makes the book of immense value to our knowledge of daily life in Roman society. The language of the narrative and the educated speakers is pure, easy, and elegant, and the wit of the best comic passages is brilliant.