2019

The Farcical Suicide: Stoicism and the *Satyricon*

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is characterized by "fantastic arguments, emotional extravagance, and peregrine comparisons." In the sixteenth century, this mode of poetry became popular among male poets throughout Europe. Petrarchan poetry usually consists of a male-centered narrative in which the main character chooses love as his way of life. There are many tropes and themes that make up this tradition, such as the initiation of love, complaining against a woman's stubborn will, grieving the end of a love, an elegy of a woman's death, or the renunciation of love. See further Guss, *Donne, Petrarchist*, 49-50.

15 Harvey, *Ventriloquized Voices*, 118

16 Scholars have understood Donne's use of the Sapphic voice as borrowed from Ovid's fifteenth epistle "Sappho to Phaon" in the Heroides, a collection of letters centered around women who write to lovers who had abandoned them (Harvey, *Ventriloquized Voices,* 119). In his epistle, Ovid presents Sappho as a straight, desperate, and suicidal woman who yearns for the attention a young man named Phaon, who continually rejects her until she feels pushed to take her own life. In her suffering, Ovid's Sappho loses her ability to write and speak, and she laments the loss of the poetic skill and power she once possessed (Harvey, *Ventriloquized Voices*, 121). In addition, Ovid's Sappho resists her lesbian past by chastising her previous female attraction in favor of her now heterosexual attraction. See Janel Mueller, "Lesbian Erotics: The Utopian Trope of Donne's 'Sapho to Philaenis,'" in *Homosexuality in Renaissance* and *Enlightenment England: Literary Representations in Historical Context*, ed. Claude J. Summers (New York: Haworth Press, 1992), 106.

17 Revard, "Sapphic Voice," 68.

18 Benet, "Sexual Transgression," 23.

19 Harvey, *Ventriloquized Voices*, 131.

20 *Ibid*.

21 Holstun, "Lesbian Elegy," 840 (see above, n. 5, for full citation).

22 *Ibid*., 843.

23 *Ibid*., 846-847.

24 Harvey, *Ventriloquized Voices*, 118. See too Revard, "Sapphic Voice," 67.

25 Many scholars have understood Ovid's use of the Sapphic voice as a way to subordinate Sappho's own voice to his own. Harvey and Mueller argue that by taking away her poetic voice, lesbian identity, and ultimately her life in his epistle, Ovid creates a distorted vision of Sappho and feminine desire. Harvey, *Ventriloquized Voices*, 124, argues that his characterization ultimately turns Sappho into a parody of the female voice, ultimately offering Sappho's own poetic voice for comic scrutiny.

26 Mueller, "Lesbian Erotics," 104.

27 Paula Blank, "Comparing Sappho to Philaenis: John Donne's 'Homopoetics,'" *PMLA* 110.3 (1995): 364

28 Harvey, *Ventriloquized Voices*, 133.

29 *Ibid*.

30 Benet, "Sexual Transgression," 25.

31 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 1990), 285.

32 *Ibid*, 187.

33 *Ibid*., 193.

34 Luce Irigaray,"When Our Lips Speak Together," tr. Carolyn Burke, *Signs* 6.1 (1980): 75 n. 12.

35 *Ibid*., 75.

36 *Ibid*., 76.

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Carl Teegerstrom

Stoicism was one of the most popular philosophies in the Roman Empire, with practitioners ranging from the freedman Epictetus to the Emperor Marcus Aurelius. Reflecting this popularity, the courtier-author Petronius (d. *c.* 66) alludes to and satirizes stoicism, and particularly the stoic philosopher Seneca the Younger (d. 65), in his novel the *Satyricon*.[1] Hunting for such allusions, for example, Sarah Ruden suggests that the freedman Maecenatianus from Trimalchio's dinner could be a reference to the aesthete Maecenas discussed in one of Seneca's letters.[2] Petronius' irony makes it difficult to determine his opinions with any certainty, but his depiction of suicide, a practice acceptable and at times revered under stoicism, suggests his skepticism regarding the nobility of this philosophical system. Indeed, the *Satyricon* critiques stoicism by using exaggeration and bathetic circumstances to reveal the performativity of suicide and stoicism more generally.

In stoic philosophy, suicide was (as Ruden puts it) "a religious act, one signifying the ultimate transcendence of the human will over circumstance," and, for a stoic, a greater crime than taking one's life would be "*acting as if life mattered*."[3] In his sixty-fifth letter, for example, Seneca wrote of the body as nothing more than "a chain set around [his] liberty," restricting his "free spirit," and he maintained that his "flesh will never force [him] to suffer fear or adopt a pretense unworthy of a good man." Instead, he would "break off association with it" (65.21-22).[4] Some writers praised these suicides. Pliny the Younger wrote of Arria stabbing herself to convince her husband Caecina Paetus to do the same after a failed rebellion against the Emperor Claudius. According to Pliny, after stabbing herself, she reassured her husband, "It does not hurt,

Paetus." Pliny writes that her deed was "glorious," her words were "immortal, almost divine," and she was "heroic" (3.16.6).[5] From Pliny's account, it is clear that Roman stoics saw virtue in this act.

Seneca also committed suicide rather than go to trial after being accused of conspiracy by Nero. Based on Tacitus' account, Seneca addressed his weeping friends, asking, "Where were their philosophical tenets … they had pondered on for so many years to counter misfortune?" (15.62).[6] Seneca's words reveal the stoic perception of suicide as (at least in this scenario) something rational, as an extension of philosophical tenets, and not something to weep over. Seneca himself wrote about suicide in his letters, e.g., in his seventy-seventh letter: "Like the play, so is life itself: what matters is not how long it is but how well it has been performed. It does not matter when you end. End when you want; just put a good closure on it" (77.20). Seneca writes that one should end life "when you want," and that it is therefore not important how long life is, just that it is performed well, up to and including its end. The conception of suicide as freedom or exercising agency over life, choosing to end it on one's own terms, echoes the sixty-fifth letter, but here Seneca's theatrical metaphor further indicates that stoic suicide could be seen as a type of performance. Indeed, the *Satyricon* reveals that this performativity is more than a useful metaphor with which to critique stoic suicide and philosophy, but to understand the novel's criticism one must understand the suspicion of performance in Imperial Rome.

Roman male identity was carefully policed, and this policing included suspicion of performance and a disdain for actors. Masculinity as an ideological concept was produced and reproduced societally in a twofold manner, summarized concisely by Maud Bleason, who notes that these gender norms (and social constructs of superiority in general) included "representing itself as natural and inevitable to outsiders, but stressing to insiders the importance of nurture and the vulnerability of the entire project to lapses in self-control."[7] The result of the second part of that production was internal policing. For example, physiognomy, reading character from facial expressions and gestures, was "like astrology and dream interpretation, a recognized technical specialty," and it was used in an attempt to find hidden *cinaedi*, men thought effeminate for being the passive partner in intercourse with other men.[8] This practice created a "universal atmosphere of suspicion" as everyone looked for hidden *cinaedi* while trying not to be accused of being one themselves.[9] For example, men practicing rhetoric had to make sure that they did not sway too much, that their voice was not too pliant, and that they avoided the "versatility of a professional performer."[10] Despite their popularity, then, actors were a "socially despised group" precisely because they acted to please their audience, the antithesis of the performance of masculinity.[11] There were nuances, shifts, and exceptions to this attitude, of course, but this disdain is important to understand, because the *Satyricon* makes its critique of stoic suicide by bringing the act down from philosophy to acting, questioning the nobility of the action.

This suspicion or disdain for performance was common during the reign of Nero, under whose rule Petronius and Seneca lived. For example, Pliny derisively called Nero an "actor-emperor" in the *Panegyricus* (46.4). Though Pliny represents the opinion of someone living after Nero, Tacitus in his *Annals* demonstrates that taboos concerning performance and Roman elites were relevant concerns even in Nero's lifetime. For example, Tacitus describes the controversy surrounding the Emperor Nero performing onstage by writing that the senate offered Nero "victory in singing … in order to keep hidden a scandalous stage performance" (16.4). The senate's actions as described by Tacitus indicate the disdain for actors and performance: the senate tried to keep Nero's performance hidden because his performance would have been considered a scandal. Though the *Annals* focus more on Nero, it does indicate that the hatred of actors and suspicion of performance described by Gleason was a feature of Roman society. The *Satyricon* exploits these suspicions by depicting stoic suicide as a performance or farce, bringing a noble philosophy down to the level of actors. The nobility of stoicism itself is thus called into question, with their purportedly noble ideals enacted in ignoble ways.

The *Satyricon* removes the pretension of suicide and depicts it as a theatrical event to highlight its performativity. One example of the "farcical suicide" occurs in Part 4 of the novel, when Giton catches Encolpius in the act of suicide, saves him, takes a razor from Eumolpus' hired man, and apparently slit his own throat. When Encolpius tries to do the same, he discovers that the razor is now dull (94). The farcical quality of this scene is hard to deny. Giton tells Encolpius, "Here's proof that those who really want to die never take long" (94), and he describes himself as an example of proper suicide by proving it does not take long. Giton could be read as a farcical adaptation of Pliny's story of Arria, telling her husband "it does not hurt" (3.16.6). Both use their bodies to make a point: real suicide does not take long and does not hurt. However, as Jo-Ann Shelton notes, Arria was convincing her husband to do the same, so she was "praiseworthy" for acting "toward the welfare of her husband" by convincing him to uphold his honor.[12] In the *Satyricon,* Giton chastises Encolpius for trying to die before him, and he uses himself as an example of "what you [i.e., Encolpius] wanted *me* [Giton] to find" (94). An act of preserving honor becomes the chastisement of lovers. Further, Giton's wish to die with Encolpius could be a farcical adaptation of the loving wife committing suicide with her husband. Seneca's wife Pompeia Paulina, for example, made what Tacitus describes as the "noble decision" of dying with her husband (15.63). But again, the circumstances are bathetic in the *Satyricon*. Giton and Encolpius are not bravely taking their lives into their own hands rather than going to trial. The pretense of no-

bility and politics is removed, and they are therefore only "lovers playing out [a] drama" (95), with the word "drama" pointing directly to the performativity of Giton's actions. Giton is performing for Encolpius, and his razor is even dull, like a prop. Without the pretense of nobility in suicide, then, the novel can be seen as calling for a reconsideration of the act of suicide among the nobility and the stoics. If Giton is performing for Encolpius, perhaps one can consider Arria, Pompeia, and even Seneca as performing for themselves, their partners, and for Rome, attempting to prove their devotion to their partners or to their ideas. Given the Roman disdain for actors, the novel could be read as a critique of stoic suicide, revealing it has more in common with a drama than with true philosophical doctrine.

Petronius made his own suicide into a farcical performance. Like Seneca, Petronius committed suicide, but he did not treat the act with the reverence of a stoic. According to Tacitus, he "bandaged [his veins] and opened them again, as he felt inclined" (16.19). Instead of discussing serious philosophy like Seneca, Petronius chatted about "light poetry and playful verses," which were not topics "that would win him glory for his resolve" (16.19). Instead of dictating a long, eloquent work like Seneca, Petronius composed a list of the "emperor's depravities" (16.19). He did not commit suicide as a point of honor, but as Ruden suggests, his suicide could be read as a parody of Seneca's: perhaps Petronius recognized the performativity of stoic suicide, the "speechifying show" of Seneca's suicide.[13] He recognized Seneca was pleasing his admirers by demonstrating good stoic virtue. Petronius therefore dropped the pretension, making the act actually an act, making the metaphorical play Seneca described real, and bringing stoic suicide down from nobility to the level of an actor.

To return to the *Satyricon*, the novel also can be read as acting out this criticism of stoicism in its form. The *Satyricon* critiques stoicism more generally by placing philosophical statements in fiction, a type of performance meant to, like drama, please. The characters are actors created by Petronius, performing absurd scenarios to please the Roman reader. When the *Satyricon* mimics stoic rhetoric, the rhetoric becomes part of that framework. For example, washing up on shore after a shipwreck, Encolpius bemoans the futility of human life, exclaiming: "This is what mortal plans come to; this is the result of all our great dreams and ambitions. A man in this world is simply at sea!" (115). Encolpius' speech could easily be read as stoic, since he talks about the futility of human life and endeavors, implying one should not care about life too dearly—a stoic position. Indeed, Ruden reads this scene as a parody of Seneca's shipwreck motif.[14] But, the "awful pun"—"A man in the world is simply at sea"—and the bathetic context of a "sordid erotic adventure involving at least five people" add to the entertainment of the scene, making Encolpius' speech more melodramatic and humorous than an attempt to offer serious insights derived from reason.[15]

The narrative works to please its readers with philosophical ideas. Encolpius acts out stoicism like an actor on stage. His speech is not persuasive, but pleasing like that of an actor the Romans despised. Further, considering the "emotional, melodramatic style" of Seneca, Petronius may be showing the divide between dignified content and undignified form.[16] On a formal level, then, he critiques the performativity of stoicism by placing its philosophy in the context of pleasing literature, bringing philosophers down to the level of farcical characters, potentially showing they are more similar than previously thought.

The *Satyricon* parodies and critiques the stoic suicide by exaggerating its performativity, thereby transforming a philosophy popular among aristocrats into a farce or drama and making the characters that say and do stoic things into caricatures acting out bathetic situations. The *Satyricon* uses its status of fiction to reinforce this critique. Without the pretense of honor and doctrine, the very nobility of stoic suicide, and potentially of stoicism itself, is made doubtful. Perhaps Petronius, in his project to show the ignobility of Roman society, showed the ignobility of stoicism by revealing that stoics are little more than actors themselves, people more worthy of suspicion than admiration.

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NOTES

1 All quotations of Petronius' *Satyricon*, cited parenthetically according to the ancient text, are from *Petronius: Satyricon*, tr. Sarah Ruden, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000).
2 Ruden, *ed. cit.*, 54-55.
3 *Ibid.*, 186 (emphasis in original).
4 *Seneca: Selected Letters*, tr. Elaine Fantham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
5 Pliny, *Letters and Panegyricus in Two Volumes*, tr. Betty Radice, Loeb Classical Library 55 and 59 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969).
6 Tacitus, *Annals: The Reigns of Tiberius, Claudius, and Nero*, tr. J.C. Yardley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).
7 Maud Gleason, "Elite Male Identity in the Roman Empire," in *Life, Death, and Entertainment in the Roman Empire,* eds. D.S. Potter and D.J. Mattingly (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 67.
8 *Ibid.*, 75-76.
9 *Ibid.*, 78.
10 *Ibid.*, 79, 82.
11 *Ibid.*, 82.
12 Jo-Ann Shelton, *As the Romans Did* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 294.
13 Ruden, *ed. cit.*, 188
14 *Ibid.*, 187.
15 *Ibid.*
16 *Ibid.*, 186.