Latin literary remedies for erectile dysfunction: Petronius, Roman erotic poetry and the socio-cultural history of "impotence"

Quotes from Ovid, *Amores* 3.7, dramatizing the temporary failure of its poet-speaker to perform sexually, and Petronius, *Satyricon* 126 ff., depicting the painful efforts of Encolpius, its first person-narrator, to cure his longstanding erectile dysfunction, begin Angus McLaren's *Impotence: a Cultural History*. McLaren's 2007 study locates "male incapacity" in the context of changing social expectations and cultural forces over the centuries. Our paper builds on McLaren's historical analysis and insights to contextualize Petronius' literary representation of Encolpius' disability and its medical remedies: by considering how Latin erotic poetry depicts male impotence; and how, according to McLaren, male impotence has been viewed and treated over two subsequent millennia. Yet we also raise questions about McLaren's observations regarding these, "seminal," Latin texts.

McLaren connects the recent "reconfiguration" of the term "impotence" as "erectile dysfunction" with the advent of "small family culture" during the 20th century, whereby men no longer proved their potency by siring children but rather by being accomplished sexual partners, affording women pleasure. Yet the scenarios of both Latin erotic poetry and the *Satyricon* are

strikingly modern, since their male characters are not concerned with producing offspring, only with satisfying females. McLaren notes as well that Western culture has simultaneously regarded impotence as "life's greatest tragedy and greatest joke", an affective dichotomy powerfully exploited by both Latin poets and Petronius.

Furthermore, McLaren states that Encolpius is cured by "a sadistic old priestess who buggers him with a leather dildo smeared with oil, pepper and nettle seeds" He reports that ancient medical authorities recommend these same ingredients as remedies for Encolpius' condition. Yet he does not acknowledge the affront to Encolpius' masculinity by being anally penetrated, nor the attribution of Encolpius' condition to a boy lover, contrary to his claims that "there are no [classical] references to same-sex acts endangering…males."

Bibliography

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