CENA TRIMALCHIONIS: THE MAN BEHIND THE MASK

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This article re-examines the figure of Trimalchio in Petronius' *Cena Trimalchionis*, arguing against the enduring tendency to dismiss him as a purely grotesque parody of the *nouveau riche*. Through close analysis of the banquet's spectacles, narrative instability, and Encolpius' unreliable focalisation, it is argued that Trimalchio's excesses function as performative self-fashioning rooted in freedman status anxiety, Roman social hierarchy, and social liminality. Rather than mere buffoonery, Trimalchio's world of illusion exposes the fragility of social hierarchies and implicates the reader in the text's unsettling play between ridicule, identification, and self-recognition.

Keywords: Petronius; Trimalchio; *Cena Trimalchionis*; Roman freedmen; narrative performance; social dissonance; self-fashioning.

Introduction

Arguably the most striking feature of the *Cena Trimalchionis* is the figure of Trimalchio himself: the vulgar, eccentric millionaire whose only mission in life, it often seems, is to flaunt both his outrageous wealth and his own self-importance. Bald, fat and dripping in jewellery, he cleans his teeth with a silver toothpick, threatens to buy Sicily so that he can cruise along his own coastline, and lectures his guests on the curative virtues of farting. Unsurprisingly, the reception of Trimalchio ranges from comic mockery to outright contempt. Most commonly, Petronius' slave-turned-millionaire has been dismissed as a grotesque parody of the *nouveau riche*: a laughably uncultivated buffoon who desperately strives to emulate the Roman elite, only to betray at every turn the ineradicable markers of his servile past.[1] F. Scott Fitzgerald famously resurrected this archetype in the figure of Jay Gatsby – another outsider who attempts self-reinvention through ostentatious display but never secures true admission into the world he imitates.[2]

[1] See, for example, Cameron 1969:367–70, Fredericks 1974:89–113, Sandy 1974:329–46, Saylor 1987:593–602, Bodel 1999:38–51, Rosati 1999:85–104, Courtney 2001:72–126, and Hope 2009:140–160. Throughout this article I follow the convention of referring to 'Petronius' as the notional author of the *Satyricon*, distinct from both the historical figure described by Tacitus and the internal narrator Encolpius.

[2] For Petronian influences in *The Great Gatsby*, see MacKendrick 1950:307–314, and Endres 2009:65–79.

Others have detected darker implications, reading Trimalchio as a caricature of Nero.[3] More recent commentators have linked his egomaniacal excesses to figures from contemporary celebrity culture, from Donald Trump to the Kardashians.[4] Yet the world of the *Cena* is fundamentally unstable, a topsy-turvy realm in which nothing is ever quite what it seems: truths shimmer and slip away just as the reader grasps at them. I suggest that the same is true of Trimalchio himself: beneath the bombast and the bravado, there lies something more complicated – something that emerges only once we look, as it were, behind the mask.[5]

The Cena Trimalchionis

Interpretations of the *Cena* have long ranged across an impressively eclectic spectrum. Some readers have treated the episode as a kind of *katabasis*, a descent into the underworld, emphasising its funereal atmosphere and its flirtation with death; others have imagined it as a labyrinth of illusion, a self-conscious maze of narrative tricks, or even a miniature universe governed by its own carnivalesque logic. Still others have explored the linguistic and socio-economic energies of the text, focusing on the freedmen's speech, their uneasy negotiation of literacy, and the subversive pleasures of Petronius' fictional world.[6] These diverse approaches testify to the extraordinary elasticity of the *Satyricon* and the interpretive freedom Petronius invites. Yet while they illuminate many important aspects of the banquet scene, my interest here lies elsewhere: in the unstable, performative, and often psychologically revealing self-fashioning of Trimalchio himself – a figure whose comic excesses mask more complex anxieties about status, identity, and the fragile business of being 'a man among men'.

One of Trimalchio's most striking characteristics is his fascination with death, particularly his own. Throughout the *Cena*, he reminds his guests that life is short and time is running out (34, 55, 72). He keeps a water clock and a trumpeter

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[3] For various parallels between Trimalchio and Nero, see Morales 2011:xxxiii–xxxiv.

[4] See Muschamp 1999, Riotta 2016, Schlude 2018, and Dominik 2025 for modern comparisons between Trimalchio and figures of conspicuous wealth, celebrity culture, and performative extravagance.

[5] Latin texts throughout from Müller 1983. Unless otherwise noted, all English translations are from Sullivan 2011.

[6] On *katabasis*, see Courtney 1978:408–410, and Bodel 1994:237–59. On labyrinthine structures and Platonic inflections, see Cameron 1969:367–70, 1970:397–425, and Holmes 2008:43–57. On Bakhtinian, carnivalesque, or metafictional universes, see Branham 2002:161–86, 2020 *passim*, and Rimell 2002:123–39. On sociolect, literacy, and freedman subversion, see Arrowsmith 1966:304–31, Horsfall 1989:194–209, and Boyce 1991 *passim*. On epigraphic play and authorial games, see Conte 1996:1–36, Rimell 2002:18–31, and Nelis-Clément and Nelis 2005:145–64.

in his dining-room to announce how much longer he has to live (26), decorates his entrance hall with a mural of the three Fates spinning golden threads (29), and proudly reports that an astrologer has calculated his remaining years with unnerving precision: thirty years, four months, and two days (77). In a spectacular display of self-indulgent sentimentality, he even subjects his guests to a full dress rehearsal for his own funeral. It begins with a public reading of his will, continues with meticulous instructions for the construction of his mausoleum – 'it's a big mistake,' he opines, 'to have nice houses just for when you're alive and not worry about the one we have to live in for much longer' (*valde enim falsum est vivo quidem domos cultas esse, non curari eas, ubi diutius nobis habitandum est*; 71.7) – and culminates in an emotionally charged recitation of his own epitaph. By this point, there is scarcely a dry eye in the room (72). The spectacle finally concludes when Trimalchio – now very much the worse for wine – flops back on the couch, shrouded in his own funeral cloth, and instructs his trumpeters: 'Pretend I'm dead. Play something nice' (*'fingite me' inquit 'mortuum esse. dicite aliquid belli'*; 78.5).

Several scholars have argued that Trimalchio is a morbid figure obsessed with death.[7] But, as with most things in Trimalchio's world, the situation is more complicated than it first appears. For one thing, as Hope points out, death was deeply integrated into Roman social life in ways that can seem alien to modern sensibilities; the 'good Roman' was expected to contemplate his own mortality, and *mementa mortis* such as Trimalchio's macabre skeleton (34) were common features at dinner parties (2009:140–143). More importantly, the perspective through which we witness Trimalchio's mock-funeral is hardly neutral. Petronius' narrator Encolpius may dismiss the scene as grotesque – 'the whole thing was becoming absolutely sickening' (*ibat res ad summam nauseam*; 78.5) – but he is hardly a model of reliability. A habitual mythomaniac, he inflates a skirmish with three hungry geese into a Herculean battle worthy of five verses of hexameter (136).[8] As Conte has shown, Petronius' 'hidden author' habitually destabilises narrative perspective, and Encolpius' judgements often tell us more about his own limitations than about the objects of his scorn (1996:3–15). Seen from this angle, Trimalchio's funerary theatrics look less like pathological morbidity and more like another instance of the boundary-blurring performances that govern his entire world.

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[7] See, for example, Arrowsmith 1966:306, Cameron 1970:338, and Bodel 1994:237. For the numerous allusions to death in the *Cena* and their varying interpretations, see Hope 2009:142–143.

[8] Conte (1996:23–24) uses the term 'mythomaniac' to describe Encolpius' tendency to recast mundane events in elevated, often epic literary terms – a habitual distortion of reality that reinforces the blurred boundaries between fantasy and experience throughout the *Satyricon*.

Far from being morose, Trimalchio is in fact one of the most optimistic and emotionally stable characters in the *Satyricon* – certainly far more so than Encolpius, Ascyltos, or Giton, all of whom are prone to spectacular bouts of self-pity, hysteria, and suicidal theatrics.[9] When Encolpius suffers a spell of impotence, he launches into a bitter diatribe against his own penis and threatens to avenge himself by castrating the offending member (132). Trimalchio responds to the brevity and unpredictability of human life rather differently: not with despair, but with a determination to seize whatever pleasures remain. Again and again he urges his guests to eat, drink, and enjoy themselves while they still can: 'Well, since we know we've got to die, why don't we live a little? I want to see you enjoying yourselves' (*'ergo' inquit 'cum sciamus nos morituros esse, quare non vivamus? sic vos felices videam'*; 72.2–3; cf. 34, 55, 75). As for his own death, he anticipates his funerary festivities with an almost childlike enthusiasm – 'as if it were a day of personal triumph'(Rankin 1971:27).[10] And the spectacle is carefully orchestrated to give the impression that every detail has been painstakingly planned: from the exact dimensions of his tomb (71.6–7) and the precise wording of his epitaph (71.8–12), to the guard posted expressly to prevent anyone from defecating on his monument (71.8.4–5), and even the instructions concerning the treatment of his corpse (77.7).

Although Trimalchio's fascination with death is undeniably exaggerated for comic and parodic effect – Petronius may well be lampooning those who fret endlessly over material arrangements while neglecting loftier philosophical considerations – the impulse itself, as Hope has shown (2009:153), has a strong historical and psychological foundation:

> It has long been noted that funerary commemoration, epitaphs, markers, and tombs, appear to have appealed to, and have been set up to and by, freed slaves more than any other social group…For those, like Trimalchio, who had risen from little…their earthly legacy may have been more important than the prospect of any life to come. To get it right, to ensure that the tomb told the desired story, one needed to take matters into one's own hands.[11]

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[9] Cf. Rankin 1971:13–14: 'The principal three characters, Encolpius, Ascyltos and Giton, are markedly unstable, and are, like the characters mime, essentially 'on the run', pursued by the intractability of the world and the inevitability of debasing misfortunes'; and 46: 'Encolpius, Giton and Ascyltos are given to morbidity and… this leads to threats of suicide when they are faced with emotional situations which place too heavy a demand upon their resources'.

[10] See, for example, 71.9 and 78.2.

[11] See also Hope 2009:147. Cf. Hermeros' fierce defense of his own accomplishments (57–58) and the obvious pride with which Trimalchio recounts his own rise to success (75–76).

Seen from this perspective, Trimalchio's preoccupation with his own funeral reads less as morbidity and more as a compensatory performance shaped by his servile past – another attempt to control the narrative of his own identity. The design of his tomb, with its elaborate emphasis on his successes, tastes, affiliations, and various public and private roles, offers a retrospective celebration of a life lived – not a prospective meditation on the life to come (Hope 2009:147) – and his almost touching desire to perfect every detail (*inscriptio quoque vide diligenter si haec satis idonea tibi videtur*; 'As for the inscription now, take a good look and see if this seems suitable enough'; 71.12) reflects the anxieties of a man determined to curate the memory he will leave behind. Nor is this concern unique to Trimalchio: Seleucus and Phileros' lengthy discussion of the death of 'poor old Chrysanthus' (42–43) suggests that the desire for 'a good send-off' (42.6) was widely shared among freedmen.

Trimalchio's real obsession – and one that distinguishes him from every other character in the *Cena* – is his penchant for blurring boundaries, those moments in the *Cena* where categories we normally take for granted (life and death, truth and pretence, appearance and reality) begin to collapse. A small linguistic clue gives us some indication of how far this instability extends. The word *tamquam* ('as if', 'as though') appears seventy-three times in the *Satyricon*, with no fewer than thirty-four of these occurring in the *Cena* alone; what is especially noteworthy is that the majority of these *Cena* instances cluster around Trimalchio and the various spectacles he engineers, marking the episode as a space where events unfold not quite as they are but *as if* they were.[12] This blurring becomes especially explicit during the mock-funeral. Trimalchio claims he reads out his will so that his household will (*ut familia mea…*) 'love me now as much as if (*tamquam*) I was dead' (71.3–4). As he recites his epitaph, 'the whole household filled the dining-room with their wailing, as though (*tamquam*) at a funeral' (*tota denique familia, tamquam in funus rogata, lamentatione triclinium implevit*; 72.1–2). Later, anointing his guests with the very oil chosen for his own corpse, he remarks: 'I hope this'll be as nice when I'm dead as when (*tamquam*) I'm alive' (*spero inquit futurum ut aeque me mortuum iuvet tamquam vivum*; 78.3–4). Life and death, present and future, body and corpse all bleed into one another, a collapse of boundaries that becomes the governing logic of Trimalchio's world. As Rimell has observed, Petronius constructs a fictional universe in which such ontological

[12] For the distinctive stylistic texture of the *Cena*, including its heightened use of comparison markers, formulae, and performative idioms, see Horsfall 1989:74–89, Boyce 1991:36–75, Courtney 2001:72–126, Rimell 2002:49–59, 2009:65–81, Goldman 2008:49–65, and Schmeling 2011 *passim*.

slippages are not glitches but the very texture of the narrative, and Trimalchio proves to be its most enthusiastic practitioner (2002:1–17, 49–59).

Trimalchio also delights in collapsing the boundary between appearance and reality more broadly. Everything about him signals performance. His theatricality is evident from the moment we first meet him – a bald old man in slippers who urinates into a silver chamber-pot and then wipes his hands on a slave's hair before being swept away in a litter (28.5). And this love of spectacle is contagious: it radiates outwards, shaping not only his behaviour but the entire environment of his household, which becomes a stage set designed to deceive, astonish, and amuse. Nothing is as it first appears – not even the food: pastry hen's eggs conceal marinated fig-peckers (33); a hare is disguised as Pegasus (36); a boar bursts open to release a flock of live birds (40); and a pastry Priapus obligingly squirts saffron from its phallic spout into the faces of unsuspecting diners (60). Some of Trimalchio's games are simple and, at times, self-consciously feeble jokes: the carver named Carver (38);[13] the artisan named Corinth who supplies genuine 'Corinthian' bronze (50); and the slave theatrically freed while dressed as Liber (41).[14] Yet even these silly puns and contrivances reinforce the same pattern. Trimalchio presides over a world in which everything – dishes, slaves, deities, even literary allusions – is staged, costumed, or masquerading as something else.

These, however, emerge as merely a prelude to what is to come, for Trimalchio's repertoire of illusions does not stop at saffron-squirting pastries and mythological puns; some of his productions are far more elaborate, carefully choreographed in advance to astonish, wrong-foot, or simply bewilder his guests. One such set piece begins innocently enough with a troop of performers reciting a scene from Homer (59). Trimalchio immediately takes it upon himself to explain the mythological background (59) – a characteristic display of his exuberant, if somewhat creatively embellished, command of myth.[15] Then, with customary flourish, the recital bursts into life. A whole boiled calf is brought in, wearing a helmet, followed by the figure of Ajax, who promptly begins 'slashing at the calf with a drawn sword like (*tamquam*) a madman' (59.7).

The Ajax-scene is clearly meant as a surprise conclusion to the Homeric episode, but Trimalchio's manipulation of illusion does not stop at the level of

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[13] A pun: *Carpe* is both the vocative of the name *Carpus* and the singular imperative of the verb *carpere* 'to cut into pieces' or 'to carve' (36.6–8).

[14] Another pun: *Liber* means 'free'. It is also another name for the god Dionysus. So, when Trimalchio asks the slave Dionysus to be 'Liber', the boy understands him to mean 'now be free' and consequently dons the cap of a freedman (41.6–8).

[15] Further examples of Trimalchio's myth-making at 39, 48, 50, 52, and 68. On the inherent fluidity and variation of mythic narratives in antiquity, see Graf 1987:57-79 and Gantz 1993 *passim*.

literary fiction. At times he orchestrates the same theatrical logic within the lived reality of the dinner itself, staging events that appear entirely real until the moment their artificiality is revealed. Two slaves are hauled into the dining-room who have 'apparently (*tamquam*) … had a quarrel at the well' (70.4). Trimalchio listens gravely to both sides of the dispute. Then, just as he begins to deliver his verdict, the slaves suddenly start attacking each other with sticks. Water-jugs burst open, oysters and scallops erupt into the room, and – voilà! – the next course is served (70.6–7). What seemed to be an unscripted quarrel turns out, in fact, to have been another carefully orchestrated performance staged by Trimalchio himself, a sign that even reality itself can be made to behave *as if* it were part of the performance.

At other times, the boundary between appearance and reality is so blurred that it becomes impossible for guests and reader alike to tell them apart. During the acrobatic performance, one of the slaves takes a tumble and lands on Trimalchio's couch: …('Trimalchio himself groaned heavily and leaned over his arm as though (*tamquam*) it were hurt' (54.2). Doctors rush in, Fortunata becomes hysterical, and the unfortunate slave crawls about the floor begging for mercy. We suspect, as does Encolpius,[16] that the whole drama is an elaborate set-up, but we cannot be certain. In the end, and entirely in keeping with the spirit of the show, Trimalchio magnanimously grants the slave his freedom, *ne quis posset dicere tantum virum esse a servo vulneratum* ('so that no one could say that such a great figure had been injured by a slave', 54.5). One begins to feel that dinner at Trimalchio's is less a meal than a series of practical jokes written, directed, and gleefully performed by the host himself – a kind of immersive theatre in which the audience is never quite sure who the real target of the joke is. That uncertainty is precisely the point: Trimalchio's world is designed not simply to nourish or even to amuse, but to bewilder, destabilise, and render unstable the very boundaries that organise both the dinner and our experience of it.

Every aspect of these various pretences and tableaus – the ostentatious displays of luxury, the extravagant freeing of slaves, the insistent demonstrations of culture and refinement – is designed to show Trimalchio 'at an advantage to his guests' (Rankin 1971:42); to impress upon them his wealth, his cultivated tastes, his power, and his social significance. When he unveils a spectacular dish of hors d'oeuvres arranged in the shape of the twelve zodiac signs – all circling a winged hare (Pegasus) – he cannot resist spelling out the point (39.4–5):

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[16] See 54.3: *pessime mihi erat, ne his precibus per <rid>iculum aliquid catastrophe quaereretur* ('I had a very uneasy feeling his pleadings might be the prelude to some funny surprise ending').

> *oportet etiam inter cenandum philologiam nosse. patrono meo ossa bene quiescant, qui me hominem inter homines voluit esse. nam mihi nihil novi potest afferri, sicut ille fer[i]culus †ta mel† habuit praxim.*
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> One must display some culture, even at dinner. My patron – God rest his bones! – wanted me to be a man among men. There is no refinement that is new to me – as that there dish proves.

This desperate need to prove himself a *homo inter homines* – and this exact sentiment recurs several times in the *Cena* (cf. 57.5, 74.13) – is the key to Petronius' characterisation of Trimalchio. Everything else – the fixation with his own funeral arrangements, the preposterous food, the autobiographical paintings plastered across his walls, even the running commentary on the state of his bowels – stems from the same driving impulse to assert his worth. At its core lies a deeply rooted sense of inferiority derived from his status as a *libertinus* rather than an *ingenuus*, a 'freedman' rather than a 'freeborn'.

Because their wealth was deemed socially suspect, the greater the fortune freedmen amassed, the more resentment they often provoked. This was not merely a private sense of inadequacy, but a social fact embedded in Roman ideology: a person's legal and natal status remained visible, remembered, and remarked upon regardless of material success. As Mouritsen (2011:66–71, 98–103, 112–117) has shown, literary and epigraphic evidence alike suggest that freedmen were frequently reminded of their servile origins, and their achievements were often viewed with suspicion or hostility by the freeborn elite. In other words, Roman society itself constructed the tension between wealth and status – a tension produced not by Trimalchio's psychology alone but by the structural limitations placed upon him as a *libertinus*. Modern sociology labels this kind of mismatch *status dissonance*: the condition that arises when an individual satisfies some but not all of the criteria associated with higher social standing.[17] In the Roman case, the crucial marker was not wealth but *ingenuitas* – the status of being freeborn – something that no amount of economic success could supply. It is precisely this socially created liminality – neither slave nor freeborn, privileged yet still marked by servile origin[18] – that animates Trimalchio's compulsive self-fashioning and drives his obsessive impulse to blur the boundaries between truth and fiction, performance and reality, life and death. The resulting instability mirrors his own

[17] On the social tensions created by wealthy freedmen and the friction between economic success and entrenched status hierarchies, see Mouritsen 2011:66–119; on the persistent stigma attached to freedman status, the visibility of servile origins, and elite resentment toward wealthy *libertini*, see Mouritsen 2011:10–35, Borg 2012:25–49, and MacLean 2018:1–34.

[18] Cf. Boyce 1991:98–9's discussion on Trimalchio's 'social schizophrenia'.

ambiguous social position. Alternatively, it may be read as a form of rebellion: an attempt to strike back at a social order that keeps him permanently in between by compelling his guests – and his readers – to inhabit that same moment of existential suspension, if only for the duration of the dinner.

Encolpius, through whose eyes readers experience the *Cena*, frequently presents Trimalchio with tones of disdain, exasperation or amused contempt – and many readers have taken their cue from him.[19] As Morales (2011:xxxiii) notes, ridicule of the social climber often functions to reinforce elite hierarchies, and many readers have interpreted Trimalchio's portrayal through this lens. Hope, for instance, suggests that 'Trimalchio…is being deliberately set up, albeit in exaggerated form, as a crass ex-slave swimming against the tide of elite good taste' (2009:157).[20] Yet before we accept Encolpius' perspective as authoritative, it is worth pausing to consider the narrative situation. Conte (1996:1–36) has shown how Petronius' 'hidden author' systematically destabilises narrative viewpoint, and that Encolpius' comments often reflect his own prejudices, insecurities, and chronic misreadings rather than any straightforward authorial stance.

Once we realise how much of Trimalchio we see through Encolpius' squint, it is hardly surprising that modern scholars have quarrelled over whether Petronius himself disliked men of Trimalchio's type.[21] The evidence for any personal animus is thin. As Rankin (1971:26) observes, Petronius' fiction offers little sign of sustained empathy for *any* of its characters – including Encolpius, who may, in some respects, resemble the author but just as often becomes the butt of the narrative's own jokes. Trimalchio is certainly treated satirically, and satire necessarily entails a degree of criticism, yet this alone does not prove genuine hostility on the author's part. If anything, the shifting, sometimes contradictory tone of Encolpius' descriptions suggests that his own discomfort and biases – rather than Petronius' supposed contempt – shape much of our initial impression of Trimalchio.

Trimalchio may indeed be crass and self-aggrandising, but he is neither ungenerous nor devoid of humanity, particularly toward his slaves. He threatens

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[19] See, for example, the manner in which Encolpius describes Trimalchio's entrance in grotesque and faintly disgusted detail (27); treats several of the culinary and theatrical spectacles as tasteless excess (33–36, 40, 49, 59, 69); shows impatience with Trimalchio's didactic philosophising (48–49, 56); notes Ascyltos' (57) and Giton's (58) unrestrained laughter at their host's mythological pretensions; declares his own sense of nausea at the mock funeral (78); and shows evident relief at finally escaping the house (78–80).

[20] See also Cameron 1969:367–70, Fredericks 1974:99–100, Walsh 1996:xxviii–xxix, Bodel 1999:38–51, and Courtney 2001:103–104, 109–110, 123.

[21] Walsh 1996:xxxii,for example, claims that Petronius was 'particularly offended' by wealthy freedmen like Trimalchio.

them with punishment at various points, yet always relents in the end (49, 52, 54). Whether these misdemeanours are genuine or deliberately staged to showcase his magnanimity, the outcome is the same: Trimalchio chooses mercy. Unlike many of his guests, he is no snob.[22] He openly acknowledges, and even sympathises with, the hardships of the slave condition he himself once endured: 'My dear people… slaves are human beings too. They drink the same milk as anybody else, even if cruel Fate has been against them' (*amici, inquit et servi homines sunt et aeque unum lactem biberunt, etiam si illos malus fatus oppresserit*; 71.1).[23] In fact, the only character who suffers any cruelty at his hands is Fortunata – Trimalchio's ex-stripper/lap-dancer wife, now the hard-nosed manager of his business affairs. When a not 'bad looking' young slave boy appears and Trimalchio kisses him rather too warmly, Fortunata unleashes a torrent of abuse ('You dirty dog!'), and Trimalchio retaliates by flinging a glass at her head. 'She screamed as though (*tamquam*) she'd lost an eye and put her trembling hands across her face' (74). Yet her theatrical reaction (*illa tamquam oculum perdidisset*) so closely mirrors Trimalchio's own exaggerated groaning when the acrobat 'accidentally' falls on his arm (*superque bracchium tamquam laesum incubuisset*, 54) that one begins to suspect the entire quarrel is just another performance in the evening's entertainment. Given what we have already been told about Trimalchio's affection for her (37) – and the extravagant display of self-pity he performs afterwards (75) – the scene looks less like genuine domestic strife than another well-rehearsed instalment of his ongoing 'dinner with a show'.

Although it is the absurd Encolpius, or 'In-crotch',[24] who is cast in the role of a Petronian Odysseus, an eternal sufferer narrating his own catalogue of sexual misadventures,[25] it is Trimalchio who is in many ways far closer to the 'much-

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[22] Cf., for example, Hermeros' condescending treatment of Giton (58) and the diners' collective contempt for the acrobat whose fall interrupts their entertainment (54).

[23] Cf. 75.10-11.

[24] The nickname 'In-crotch' reflects only one facet of Encolpius' name. The Greek *kolpos* (LSJ s.v.; often rendered in Latin as *sinus*) has a broad semantic range, encompassing not only the lap or fold of a garment but also the bosom, womb, bay, cove, or hollow. The ambiguity is likely intentional: Petronius' choice of name may evoke physicality, intimacy, concealment, or containment, and no single English gloss captures its full nuance. My translation foregrounds one possible shade of meaning, especially given that – in a parody of the famous recognition scene in *Odyssey* 19 – Lichas confirms Encolpius' identity by reaching into his crotch and grabbing his genitals (105.9).

[25] For the idea of Encolpius as a 'Petronian Odysseus', see Rankin 1971:19, 21, 52, 64–5, Smith 1975:xvi, Morgan 2009:32–7, Richlin 2009:95, and Mordine 2013:176–99. Encolpius is also cast as an Achilles-figure (brave in words but ineffectual in action) and at times as a comic, parodic Aeneas, wandering without purpose and repeatedly failing to fulfil the heroic

enduring' hero than Encolpius. Whenever the novel's main protagonists encounter even the slightest setback, especially Encolpius and Giton, they immediately collapse into vows of self-mutilation, suicide threats, or melodramatic despair.[26] Trimalchio, however, proves to be made of sterner stuff. Despite the many disadvantages he faces in his early life – a slave in his youth, a foreigner in Italy, the sexual plaything of both his master and his mistress, and at one point on the verge of losing his entire fortune (75) – he achieves what Rankin (1971:25) describes as a 'rise in status [that] was phenomenal even for this time'. So, although Trimalchio is hardly a refined man, he is far from being ignorant or incompetent. The protagonists drift aimlessly, 'buffeted about by circumstances which they make no consistent attempt to resist' (Rankin 1971:24), but Trimalchio becomes, quite literally, the master of his own destiny. By turning his master's sexual attentions to his own advantage (75), he transforms himself from a mere utensil into an active agent and, against all odds, fashions a model of success that, as Rankin (1971:24) puts it, far eclipses anything achieved by the novel's more conventional heroes.

Rankin (1971:26) further suggests that it is more accurate to say Petronius 'understood Trimalchio rather than that he despised him'. Yet the relationship between author and creation may run deeper still. Within the world of the novel, Trimalchio and the notional author share a striking degree of narrative control: each presides over his own domain, choreographing what others see, shaping perception, and manipulating the boundaries between reality and illusion. But the affinities do not end at the level of fiction. Tacitus' portrait of Petronius hints at certain temperamental similarities between the two men – a shared taste for directness and unconventionality, as well as an aptitude for business:

> People liked the apparent freshness of his unconventional and unselfconscious sayings and doings. Nevertheless, as governor of Bithynia and later as consul, he had displayed a great capacity for business (Tac. *An.* 16.18, trans. Grant 2003).

Even the manner of Petronius' death seems uncannily in keeping with the spirit of his most flamboyant creation. Ordered to take his own life by Nero, he chose not to spend his final hours in philosophical discussion with friends, as Socrates had done before calmly drinking the hemlock,[27] but instead to outdo Trimalchio by genuinely combining his death with a party:

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ideals he invokes. For comparisons with Achilles, see Rankin 1971:64, 86, Morgan 2009:38, and Panayotakis 2009:54; with Aeneas see Panayotakis 2009:52–4, 56–8.

[26] See, for example, 79–80, 94, 97, 101, 108, 132.

[27] On the philosophical composure of Socrates' final hours, see Plato, *Phaedo* 115a–118a.

> Delay, with its hopes and fears, he refused to endure. He severed his own veins. Then, having bound them up again when the fancy took him, he talked with his friends – but not seriously, or so as to gain a name for fortitude. And he listened to them reciting, not discourses about the immortality of the soul or philosophy, but light lyrics and frivolous poems. Some slaves received presents – others, beatings. He appeared at dinner, and dozed, so that his death, even if compulsory, might look natural (Tac. *An.* 16.19, trans. Grant 2003).

Far from seeing Trimalchio as merely the butt of Petronian satire, then, we might instead glimpse in him a figure whose excesses occasionally reflect, in distorted form, the author's own flair for performance.

Conclusion

Trimalchio is a satiric character of almost heroic proportions, but one whose very human qualities emerge clearly for anyone willing to look behind the mask. Petronius may exaggerate his worst attributes for parodic effect, yet at the heart of the caricature lies the insecurity of a man who, for all his enviable success, has spent his life attempting to compensate for his servile past. From the meticulous care he lavishes on his funerary arrangements – the anxiety over how he might or should one day be remembered – to the elaborate pretences he concocts for his guests, Trimalchio's every gesture is driven by the same impulse: the desperate desire to prove himself, once and for all, a *homo inter homines*. Much about him invites ridicule, but the portrait is far more nuanced than that: he may be uncultured, but he is far from stupid; insufferable, yet not without humanity; vulgar, but remarkably generous – and never, despite all his bluster, cruel. And if his world is one of illusions and performances, it is also one in which readers are constantly drawn into the act: asked to question what is real, what is pretence, and what our own responses reveal about ourselves.

The *Cena* reminds one of John Fowles' enigmatic novel *The Magus* (1965), in which both narrator and reader are subjected to a series of increasingly baffling and sinister mythological illusions staged by an immensely wealthy and eccentric host. By the novel's end, little is clear except that the readers, like the narrator Nicholas, are meant to have discovered some essential truth about themselves. The *Cena* has a similar effect. What Petronius intended his readers to take away from this episode is uncertain, but reading the text evokes the disquieting sense that one has been drawn into a hall of mirrors. While there is no doubt that Petronius meant Trimalchio to appear ridiculous, perhaps we should be wary of laughing too derisively. After all, as Oscar Wilde (1890:3) observed, 'It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors.'

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