CASA ESSAY

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SELF-SATIRE IN THE *CENA TRIMALCHIONIS*

Christiaan Bronkhorst, Latin III (University of Cape Town)

The modern reader of the *Cena Trimalchionis*, seeing the episode grouped under the larger title *Satyrica*, could hardly be blamed for assuming *a priori* that Petronius had written a satirical work. Yet, in making this assumption, the reader overlooks a question central to the debate over the interpretation of Petronius' work: 'Can the *Cena* be read as a moralising or satirical work?'

The question initially becomes one of definition: the modern conception of satire, influenced by the work of prose writers like Rabelais and Swift, and also by political cartoonists such as Jonathan Shapiro (Zapiro), seems to be fundamentally different from the ancient conception of the genre. The satire of Rabelais, according to Bakhtin, became the foundation of the modern novel, while ancient satire '… consistently disputed the suggestion that it was in any proper sense literary at all, and made a rich career out of doing precisely what literature should not'.[1]

Are these conceptions of satire really so different? Comparing definitions of satire, ancient and modern, might provide a chance for reconciling these two seemingly disparate views on the genre. The grammarian Diomedes provides a concise ancient definition of satire:

> *Satira dicitur carmen apud Romanos nunc quidem maledicum et ad carpenda hominum vitia archaeae comoediae charactere conpositum … sive satura a lance quae referta variis multisque primitiis in sacro apud priscos dis inferebatur et a copia ac saturitate rei satura vocabatur … sive a quodam genere farciminis, quod multis rebus refertum saturam dicit Varro vocitatum … alii autem dictam putant a lege satura, quae uno rogatu multa simul comprehenat, quod scilicet et satura carmine multa simul poemata comprehenduntur*.[2]

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1 Morgan 2008:174.

2 See Keil 1857:485 for the fragment. Diomedes' definition is clearly drawn from Horace. *Cf.* Hor. *Sat*. 1.4.1-5 for the suggestion that the poets of the Old Comedy used satire to attack moral failings; and Hor. *Sat*. 1.4.39-42 for the idea that 'satire' is derived from a 'full dish'. See also Gowers 2012:163. What Diomedes omits from Horace's definition,

> *Satire* is the name given for the genre of Roman poetry, based on the model of Old Comedy, which is now abusive and composed to attack human failings ... The word 'satire' is derived either from the Satyr-plays, since in this kind of poetry [i.e. 'satirical' poetry] ridiculous and shameful things — which are made and produced just as if by Satyrs — are said in a manner similar to in the Satyr-plays. Alternatively, the word is derived from the dish [*lanx*] which in the olden days was stuffed with a large quantity of various kinds of first fruits during religious rites and offered to the gods, and which was called 'stuffed to bursting' [*satura*] from the abundance and plenitude [*saturitas*]of the fruits. Another alternative is that the word is derived from a particular kind of sausage, which was stuffed with many things and was called 'crammed sausage' [*satura*], according to Varro … Others, however, think that the name is derived from the 'catch-all law' [*lex satura*], a law which contains many provisions in one bill at the same time, arguing that in 'satirical' poems many small poems are combined together.[3]

From Diomedes, we may impute the three characteristics that form the ancient definition of satire: it has an inherently moralising tone; it hurts the subject it attacks (*L&S* adds that *maledicum* can mean 'abusive, foul-mouthed, or slanderous') and, whatever the true etymology of the word, is composed of stylistic and thematic variety. Horace's suggestion that satire deploys non-literary language is important, and is echoed by Diomedes' claim '*similiter in hoc carmine ridiculae res pudendaeque dicuntur*'. The idea that satire deploys vulgar language, then, should be added as a fourth characteristic of the ancient conception of the genre.

Pretorius, giving a modern definition, agrees that satire has these fundamental qualities, but emphasises that satire is typically characterised by certain thematic and stylistic conventions: the use of vulgar (i.e. non-literary) language, sarcasm, parody (and travesty), hyperbole, intertextuality, episodic narrative, and the use of obscene / taboo themes. Here Pretorius echoes both Diomedes' use of *res ridiculae pudendaque*, and Horace's *neque si qui scribat uti nos / sermoni propiora, putes hunc esse poetam.* Pretorius, moreover, contends that satire has to encourage reform: the satirist not only attacks the moral failings of his society, but also attempts to engender a change in moral outlook.[4]

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however, is the idea that satire uses non-literary language: *neque si qui scribat uti nos / sermoni propiora, putes hunc esse poetam* (Hor. *Sat.* 1.4.41-42).

[3] All translations are my own. On the idea of a *lex satura, cf.* the XII Tables, where each of the Tables represents a 'bill' that may contain many (sometimes disparate) provisions.

[4] Pretorius 2002:464-465.

Thus, the only significant difference between the ancient and modern conceptions of satire is that the former views satire as a genre primarily composed in verse, while the latter views it as one primarily composed in prose (and more clearly defines the satirist's goal of engendering a change in perspective). Hence, Highet's reduction of the debate over the moralising / satirical nature of the *Cena*:

> [The *Cena*] cannot be satire, if Petronius is not a moralist. Conversely, if Petronius is a moralist, his work is satire.[5]

Unfortunately, Highet's reduction is affirming the consequent: For a text may certainly be moralising without featuring any of the stylistic and thematic conventions of satire. Cato the Elder's writings have a moralising tone and purpose, but nobody would call them satire.[6] If the *Cena* is to be viewed as satire, it must be shown both to feature the conventions of satire, and to have a moralising tone that encourages a change in social perspective — be it the adoption of a new moral outlook, or nostalgia for an old one.

In analysing the *Cena*, the authorship and context of the work must be taken into account (for the context of the work is crucial when it comes to thinking about who or what the text may be satirising).[7] Accordingly, a brief excursus into the identity of the author is necessary. C*ommunis opinio* holds that the author of the *Cena* was the Petronius described by Tacitus:[8]

> *De [C.] Petronio pauca supra repetenda sunt. Nam illi dies per somnum, nox officiis et oblectamentis vitae transigebatur; utque alios industria, ita hunc ignavia ad famam protulerat, habebaturque non ganeo et profligator, ut plerique sua haurentium, sed erudito luxu. Ac dicta factaque eius quanto solutiora et quandam sui neglegentiam praeferentia, tanto gratius in speciem simplicitatis accipiebantur. Proconsul tamen Bithyniae et mox consul vigentem se ac parem negotiis ostendit. Dein revolutus ad vitia, seu vitiorum imitatione, inter paucos familiarum Neroni adsumptus est, elegentiae*

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5 Highet 1941:177.

6 Catonian works such as the *Praecepta ad filium*, or the *Carmen de moribus*, are all didactic and moralising, but lack the flavour of satire (even by ancient standards — indeed, they explicitly avoid revelling in *res ridiculae pudendaque*). They stand in sharp constrast to some of the more brutal attacks found in Martial, or in Juvenal.

7 Rimell 2005:161.

8 See Rose 1971 for an extensive argument in favour of the identification of the *Satyrica*'s author with the character described here by Tacitus. *Cf.* also Walsh 1974; Rudich 1997; and Sullivan 1963.

> *arbiter, dum nihil amoenum et molle adfluentia putat, nisi quod ei Petronius adprobavisset.*[9]

> A little more needs to be said about Petronius: for he was in the habit of spending his days asleep, and passing his nights in the business and amusements of life. Idleness had brought him to fame, just as industriousness does for others. He was considered neither a glutton nor a squanderer, like most of those who squander their resources, but rather a man of refined luxury. Moreover, the freer his talk and deeds, and the greater his *display* of carelessness, the more were they liked, for their *appearance* of natural simplicity. Yet, as proconsul of Bithynia, and soon afterwards as consul, *he showed himself* to be a man of vigour, and one equal to the task. Then, having returned to vice, or *affecting vice*, he was admitted by Nero into his inner circle, as the arbiter of good taste, while Nero considered nothing delightful or excessively pleasant, unless Petronius had expressed his approval to Nero.[10]

Walsh argues that Petronius '… rose to such prominence with a group of political opportunists who are described by Tacitus with icy contempt. His three years at court as successor to Seneca in 63-66 coincided with Nero's worst excesses'.[11] Thus, according to Walsh, it seems unlikely that Petronius would have written a work that was critical of the Neronian regime, since the author had a hand in planning its worst excesses.[12] Rudich argues differently:

> This portrait displays remarkable penetration into the working of *dissimulatio*: Petronius' true character was not what it appeared to be. And even though the actual word for dissimulation is not used, Tacitus made a singular effort to communicate its effect by placing an emphasis on pretense: almost every statement is intentionally ambiguous, containing a

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9 Tac. *Ann.* 16.18.

10 My italics. The language used by Tacitus is particularly subtle, and the author is careful to emphasise Petronius' abilitiy to appear to be someone that he is not: *praeferentia*, *speciem*, *ostendit*, and *seu vitiorum imitatione*.

11 Walsh 1974:184.

12 Here the sense of 'successor to Seneca' becomes important: Was Petronius acting as a kind of prime minister to Nero, as Seneca had done, or did he merely play the role of style-consultant? Walsh's argument seems to suggest the former, probably drawing on the fact that Petronius had held the proconsulship in Bithynia, and the consulship thereafter. Perhaps this reads too much into Tacitus' evidence, for the historian's tone certainly does not suggest that Petronius held excessive political power. *Cf.* Schmeling 2011:xvi: '… he entered Nero's inner (but not innermost) circle …'.

> paradox, two conflicting viewpoints, or an oxymoron … It requires, on the other hand, only a stretch of the imagination to visualise this singular individual penetrating Nero's inner set by pretence at vice, in order to coolly observe and eventually satirize their bizarre, or shallow, pursuits and activities.[13]

Rudich's analysis is more convincing for a number of reasons. While he might be going too far in arguing Petronius' association with Nero came about from the author's desire to satirise him, Petronius — mindful of the downfall of several prominent Neronian courtiers, Seneca among them — could easily have adopted *dissimulatio* (*vel vitiorum imitatione*) as a survival mechanism. Tacitus' portrayal of Petronius certainly confirms that he was capable of showing both virtue and vice (*ignavia ad famam protulerat* and *Proconsul tamen Bithyniae et mox consul vigentem se ac parem negotiis ostendit*).

Moreover, his status at court was ensured by the *perception* of his character: *Ac dicta factaque eius quanto solutiora et quandam sui neglegentiam praeferentia, tanto gratius in speciem simplicitatis accipiebantur*. While this is added in Tacitus' characteristic antithetical style, and may seem rather a paradox, the emphasis is clearly on the importance of the perception of his character in ensuring his role at Nero's court. Plutarch offers further evidence in support of this view:

> … ἐκεῖνα δ᾽ἤδη χαλεπὰ καὶ λυμαινόμενα τοὺς ἀνοήτους, ὅταν εἰς τἀναντία πάθη καὶ νοσήματα κατηγορῶσιν ... ἢ τοὺς ἀσώτους αὖ πάλιν καὶ πολυτελεῖς εἰς μικρολογίαν καὶ ῥυπαρίαν ὀνειδίζωσιν ὥσπερ Νέρωνα Τίτος Πετρώνος ... [14]
>
> Now we come to difficult matters, matters that inflict indignities upon those without sense, whenever [the flatterers] direct their accusations against the passions and vices which are contrary to those of the person ... Or again, on the other hand, they will reproach the profligate and extravagant spenders, accusing them of being stingy and sordid — just as Titus Petronius did with Nero.

Rudich interprets Plutarch's account as further evidence of Petronius' *dissimulatio*: Petronius hid his true identity in order to corrupt Nero further, while at the same time mocking him.[15] This may be too strong an interpretation: it seems more likely that Petronius was simply employing κολακεία, and a touch of *vitiorum imitatione*

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13 Rudich 1997:188.
14 Plut. *Mor.* 60d-e.
15 Rudich 1997:190.

to maintain his political position.[16] However that may be, the focus is still on the role played by the perception of Petronius' character in establishing his position at court.

II.

That the *Cena*, in the larger context of the *Satyrica*, follows the episodic format of satire — *res ipsa loquitur*. The *Cena* also brims with variety: the narrative switches from pseudo-academic discourses on declamation (48), to Trimalchio's ruminations on his bowel movements (47); and often includes samples of verse (34). This variety is quite consistent with the idea that satire must contain a variety of themes and narrative techniques.

The language of the freedmen in the *Cena* forms the most obvious example of Petronius' use of vulgar language (one of the characteristic features of style in satire). Habinnas, the drunken late-arrival to the dinner, spews forth numerous examples of scatological language of various degrees of coarseness: *paene intestina sua vomuit* (66); *catillum concacatum* (66); *ego me apoculo* (67); and *nunc hoc est caldum meiere et frigidum potare*.[17] Scatological language is echoed at other points in the text: *curris, stupes, satagis, tamquam mus in matella* (58); and *sed cum mulsi pultarium obduxi, frigori laecasin dico* (42).[18] This culminates in the sexualisation of the dinner conversation, an example being the set of riddles posed by one of the freedmen:

> *ecce 'qui de nobis longe venio, late venio? solve me'. dicam tibi, qui de nobis currit et de loco non movetur; qui de nobis crescit et minor fit.*[19]

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[16] This interpretation, of course, is strengthened by the logical insertion of οἱ κόλακες. See n. 14, above.

[17] Boyce 1991:90. The language is clearly vulgar, and translating a few of these phrases should give the reader without Latin an idea of their flavour: *paene intestina sua vomuit* = '[Scintilla] nearly puked out her own guts'; *concacatum* is from *concacare* = 'to shit all over something' (*cf*. Claudius' dying words in Sen. *Apoc.* 4: '*vae me, puto, concacavi me*' = 'Oh damn! I think I've shit myself'); *meiere* = 'to piss'.

[18] *Laecasin* (derived from *λαικάζειν* = *fellare*). Adams argues that *laecasin* indicates the 'total loss of cognitive force by a sexual term in a threat' (citing its use here as an example). See Adams 1982:134. *Frigori laecasin dico*, following Adams' argument, had an effect similar to 'bugger the cold'. Although the verb has lost some of its original potency, its use here is very much in keeping with satire's tendency to vulgarise (in both the original and modern sense) sexual vocabulary.

[19] Petron. *Sat*. 58. *Cf*. *Priapea* 3: *da mihi quod tu des licet, nil tamen inde perit*. The reference to Priapus is further developed by Petr. *Sat.* 60.

> Look here, and riddle me this: 'I come long, I come far. What part of us am I?' I'll give you a hint: what part of us runs and doesn't move from its place; what grows out of us, and becomes smaller?

The answer is, of course, 'penis'.[20] The use of sexualised language, moreover, combines with the use of the scatological. Since Habinnas is a priest of the College of Augustus, his scatological language vulgarises the priesthood. The mockery of the priesthood continues in one of Trimalchio's dishes:

> *iam illic repositorium cum placentis aliquot erat positum, quod medium Priapus a pistore factus tenebat, gremioque satis amplo omnis generis poma et uvas sustinebat more vulgato. avidius ad pompam manus porreximus, et repente nova ludorum commissio hilaritatem [hic] effecit. omnes enim placentae omniaque poma etiam minima vexatione contacta coeperunt effundere crocum, et usque ad os molestus umor accidere. Rati ergo sacrum esse fer[i]culum tam religioso apparatu perfusum, consurreximus altius et 'Augusto, patri patriae, feliciter' diximus.*[21]
>
> A dish with some pastries on it had now been placed there, a Priapus made by the baker was standing in the middle of the dish, and he was holding enough of every kind of fruit and grape in his wide apron, according to the fashion of the day. We stuck our hands out greedily towards the display, and suddenly a new source of laughter broke out, causing much hilarity. For all the cakes and all of the fruits — however gently they were touched — began to spurt out saffron juice, and some of the nasty juice even flew into our mouths! Thinking, therefore, that the dish must be sacred to have been anointed with such religious attention to detail, we all stood up straight and said, 'Cheers to Augustus, Father of the Fatherland!'

The spray of saffron juice, hitting the guests' cheeks, is undoubtedly a reference to ejaculation (indicated by the statue of Priapus, which adds a religious dimension to the scene). The final salutation to Augustus adds to this religious dimension. The diners' actions can be interpreted in two ways: as a general mockery of religion, or as a specific mockery of the Imperial Cult.[22] Whichever interpretation once chooses, it is clear that Petronius is pointing at the hypocrisy inherent in members

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20 Howell 1984:37.
21 Petron. *Sat*. 60 — I have preferred Buecheler's emendation of *nos* in *H* to *os*.
22 Rudich 1997:208-209.

of the Priesthood of Augustus toasting the memory of the emperor during an act of (sexualised) vulgarity.

The *Cena's* focus on vulgar sexuality is one aspect of the text's general focus on corporeality (i.e. focusing on physical aspects of the human body). The focus on corporeality is another characteristic convention of satire, one that is often transmitted to the reader by crass language. Trimalchio's meditation on constipation provides an important example:

> *'ignoscite mihi' inquit 'amici, multis iam diebus venter mihi non respondit. nec medici se inveniunt. profuit mihi tamen malicorium et taeda ex aceto. spero tamen, iam veterem pudorem sibi imponit. alioquin circa stomachum mihi sonat, putes taurum. itaque si quis vestrum voluerit sua re causa facere, non est quod illum pudeatur. nemo nostrum solide natus est. ego nullum puto tam magnum tormentum esse quam continere. hoc solum vetare ne Iovis potest'*.[23]
>
> 'Please excuse me, gents,' he said, 'my bowels haven't been working for several days now. The doctors haven't a clue. Still, pomegranate rind does me some good, and pinewood boiled in vinegar. Nonetheless, I hope my stomach will now return to its old decencies. Besides, my stomach rumbles so much you'd think a bull was in there. So, if any of you wants to go about his business, there's no shame in that. None of us was born solid. I can't imagine a torture greater than holding yourself in. That alone Jupiter can't forbid'.

This passage operates on two levels: it reinforces the reader's perception of Trimalchio as a boorish lout, while serving as a symbol of Trimalchio's lack of control over death. Trimalchio is obsessed with time and death: he owns a clock and a trumpeter '… ut subinde sciat quantum de vita perdiderit' (27); he has his first beard stored in a golden chest (29); and he reads his will and re-enacts his funeral at the close of his dinner (72).[24] Trimalchio even laughs off the subject of death with the witty ditty:

> *eheu nos miseros, quam totus homuncio nil est!*
> *sic erimus cuncti, postquam nos auferet Orcus.*
> *ergo vivamus, dum licet esse bene.*[25]

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[23] Petron. *Sat*. 47.
[24] Toohey 1997:52-53.
[25] Petron. *Sat*. 34

> Alas, we poor wretches! How all that poor man is, is nothing!
> So we shall all be, once the Reaper carries us off.
> Let's live then, while things are well.

Yet Trimalchio's words seem too flippant: his comic attempts to master the passage of time amount to an admission of failure.[26] Just as the regularity of the clock and trumpet track the advance of time, so too does the regularity of Trimalchio's bowel movements — thereby giving the false impression that the passage of time and the onset of death may be mitigated.[27] In this context, Trimalchio's constipation renders void the impression of controlling death. Here Trimalchio's words '…ego nullum puto tam magnum tormentum esse quam continere. hoc solum vetare ne Iovis potest …' become so ironic: he admits to everyone, except himself, that he is powerless over death.

The focus on death continues in the *Cena*'s many references to gladiatorial games. Saylor elucidates a number of the *Cena*'s references to *munera* (i.e. gladiatorial contests held at *funerals*).[28] Two of his examples merit further inspection. Gladiatorial games had acrobats, clowns, rhapsodists, fanfares, flourishes between duels, and musical accompaniment set to the *prolusio*, the mock-combat that preceded the real fighting. Likewise, in the *Cena*, there are flourishes at the serving of dishes (31, 34); Trimalchio's entrance is accompanied by a fanfare (32) and one of the carvers imitates the movements of a gladiator fighting to the music of a hydraulic organ (36).[29]

This has the effect of equating the dinner with *munera*, and Trimalchio with the *munerarius*. This comparison is strengthened by the images painted onto the porticoes of Trimalchio's house: the procession of the gods Mercury, Minerva, Fortuna and the Parcae, with Trimalchio in the place traditionally reserved for magistrates, echoes the procession usually held by the *munerarius* before the *munera*.[30] Of course, the pomp of such a procession foreshadows the use of processions (especially those that overturn the standard social hierarchies) in later carnivalesqe literature (e.g. in the work of Rabelais).

The *munera*-motif allows on to draw a number of conclusions about Petronius' characterisation of Trimalchio. Magistrates who had hosted lavish games could expect to gain significant popular favour. Certainly, the ability to host lavish games signified the wealth of the *munerarius.* As a freedman, Trimalchio was prevented from holding games by Augustus' law that gave the praetors the

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26 Toohey 1997:54.
27 *Ibid*.
28 Saylor 1987:593-596.
29 Saylor 1987:595.
30 *Ibid*. 596.

duty of hosting games and placed a cap on how much private money could be spent on games.[31]

Trimalchio's attempts, then, at hosting a quasi-*munera* during the *Cena* suggest his desire to increase his social status by emulating the role played by the praetors, and by making ostentatious display of his wealth. The reader may well feel pity for Trimalchio's frustrated ambitions, but cannot help but laugh at the man's small-fry attempts to compete with the established social hierarchy.

Trimalchio's 'games' affect the power-dynamics of the *Cena*: Trimalchio is attempting to place himself in a position of authority over his guests. This power-play further manifests itself in the seating arrangements of the dinner: at the beginning of the evening, Encolpius is accorded all the customary honours, while at the end of the evening he complains that a cook, a slave, has been given a better seat at the table than he has.[32]

The shifting power dynamics between host and guest become even more apparent in the tricks Trimalchio's dishes play on his guests. Trimalchio's dishes are often delicacies disguised as meagre fare: the spiced figpecker hidden in a hard shell (33); the delicacies hidden under a dish covered with the signs of the zodiac and unsophisticated scraps of food (35-36); and the sausages and black-puddings that come spilling out of a boar that the cook has supposedly forgotten to gut (49). Trimalchio takes pride in tricking his guests because it allows him to place himself in a position of superiority over them. Indeed, Trimalchio takes such great pride in his tricks that he refers to himself as Odysseus (who famously bore the epithets Πολύμητις and Πολύτροπος).[33] As Hudson argues:

> One of the most effective weapons the satirist has against the wrong-doer is ridicule. Those who take food too seriously are particularly vulnerable to this method of attack … Food was seen as an essential, to be dealt with swiftly and with the minimum of fuss. Those who seek to intellectualise or idolise food, the gourmand and the gastronome, are therefore fundamentally flawed.[34]

While Trimalchio manages to pull the wool over his guests' eyes, the reader cannot help but laugh at his ridiculous pretentiousness in doing so. Trimalchio's Falernian wine, supposedly a hundred years old, is another source of ridicule: the reader knows that wine of such age would not normally be served neat, and suspects that Trimalchio may have been duped.[35] Trimalchio's astrology, likewise, becomes a

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31 See Cass. Dio. 54.2.2-4.
32 Petron. *Sat.* 70.
33 Petron. *Sat.* 39.
34 Hudson 1989:80.
35 Petron. *Sat*. 34. See the commentary in Smith 1974:73.

source of ridicule.[36] Trimalchio's literary pretentiousness becomes most evident in his conversation with the rhetorician Agamemnon:

> *'rogo' inquit 'Agamemnon mihi carissime, numquid duodecim aerumnas Herculis tenes aut de Ulixe fabulam, quemadmodum illi Cyclops pollicem p<r>o ricino extorsit?'*[37]
>
> 'I want to know, my dearest Agamemnon,' said Trimalchio, 'if you know anything about the twelve tasks of Hercules, or the story of Odysseus, and how the Cyclops tore him off like a tick?'

Consequently, Trimalchio '… shows simultaneously his earthy and uncultured style of speech, and his desire to present himself as a cultural connoisseur despite a complete lack of grasp of metallurgy, history and mythology.'[38] The dinner conversation of the *Cena*, which conforms to the sympotic tradition, reflects Petronius' (ab)use of conventional *topoi* to enforce the irony inherent in the diners' inane philosophical musings.[39] The vacuity of the conversation, Saylor adds, is compounded by the *munera*-motif:

> The Trouble with Trimalchio's games … is that they are diminished, degenerated, unsuited for and unable to bear noble modes of conduct. The change is wrought simply by showing many games but games turned into food, the embellishment, serving, and eating of food, even as *venatio* is turned into a main course of boar and thrushes: as Echion's remarks suggest, *munus* has become *epulum*, *epulum munus*. There is a special irony in this because the food of the *Cena*, unlike the food of epic which is elevated with a certain air of spiritual grandeur, is only food, filling for the belly, unedifying in the face of death.[40]

The unwholesomeness of the food is further emphasised: Trimalchio's banquet leaves his guests feeling '… paranoid, nauseous, and trapped'.[41] The inanity of the dinnertime conversation fails to leave the guests intellectually fulfilled, while the excessive amounts of food leave them ill. This is a clever inversion of the sympotic tradition: the dinnertime conversation is supposed to edify mind and soul, while the

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36 Petron. *Sat.* 39.

37 Petron. *Sat.* 48. Following Öberg's emendation of *poricino* in *H*. Bücheler suggests *porcino*. Whatever the exact meaning, it remains clear that Trimalchio has corrupted the story of Odysseus and Polyphemus.

38 Harrison 2008:216. *Cf.* Sandy 1969:301.

39 Sandy 1970:473.

40 Saylor 1987:601.

41 Rimmel 2005:161.

food served should fortify the body. However, there is no suggestion that the guests necessarily want to be intellectually fulfilled. Indeed, they delight in participating in Trimalchio's entertainments, and in conversing about (relatively) inane topics. This underscores Petronius' depiction of the freedmen's desire to break away from the established norms of the age.

The use of irony in the *Cena* reaches its climax in Petronius' description of Trimalchio's wealth. At the beginning of the episode, we are told that Trimalchio is a *lautissimus homo* (26); His wine is *Falernian Opimianum annorum centum* (34); his estates are so extensive that he can provide himself with every sort of luxury imaginable (38); Trimalchio *fundos habet, quantum milvi volant, nummorum nummos* (37). Trimalchio, it seems, is filthy rich.

Baldwin, however, points out that Trimalchio's domestic staff is much smaller than would be expected of a wealthy man: his travelling retinue is rather small; he makes his slaves perform double duty (something Cicero excoriated Piso for); his wife seems short of staff and has to perform several domestic duties during the dinner; even his chorus of dancers is small.[42] The disjoint between appearance and reality is focalised: Trimalchio seems rich, but the state of his household suggests that he is either tight-fisted, or not as wealthy as he pretends to be.

One should, however, temper one's view of Trimalchio's household: the narrator is only able to give a small glimpse into Trimalchio's world, since that glimpse is necessarily bound by the (relatively) short duration of the *cena*-episode. Whether Trimalchio is tight-fisted or not as wealthy as he seems makes no difference: if he were tight-fisted the reader would mock his extravagant spending on food, wine and furniture as hypocritical; if he were really not as wealthy as he seemed, the reader would ridicule his pretentiousness.

Petronius' narrative technique allows for irony to developed slowly and subtly: the irony is rarely explicitly stated, and the reader has to use clues in order to notice it. This has an interesting effect: instead of directly confronting the reader with this irony, the narrative slowly builds a climate of doubt and suspicion in the reader's mind. The reader, almost independently of the narrator (who is taken in by Trimalchio's pretence), begins to realise the pretentiousness of the host. The reader is detached from Encolpius' perspective, and begins to view the *Cena* from an outsider's perspective. Thus, Petronius makes the reader feel part of the action, while at the same time making him feel like an independent observer.

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[42] See Baldwin 1978.

III.

The *Cena*, as we have seen, is full of the stylistic and thematic conventions of satire. The use of vulgarity, the focalisation on sexuality and the body, the use of the irony inherent in the disjoint between appearance and reality are all conventional tropes of satire. Does the text, however, have a moralising tone? Is it attacking anyone (or anything) in particular?

Petronius' narratological technique, specifically his use of first-person narration, makes the question difficult to answer. Rimmel points out that '... the strategy whereby the satirist abdicates his role to an implicated narrator is already a familiar one from verse satire …'[43]Yet critics have found it hard to associate Encolpius with the satirist: the narrator is sexually and psychologically impotent, unable to see through Trimalchio's pretentiousness.[44] It seems unlikely that Petronius would have chosen an impotent narrator to be his satiric mouthpiece. Critics have also argued that Petronius fails to assert a new moral perspective in the *Cena*, thereby implying that the text does not have a moralising (and hence, satirical) tone.[45]

Petronius, however, is not forced to 'abdicate his role' to his first-person narrator. Petronius' narratological technique, as we have seen, detaches the reader from Encolpius' perspective. The reader notices Trimalchio's pretentiousness, while Encolpius does not. Thus, I would argue, Petronius adds additional 'narration' to the meta-text of the *Cena*. This meta-text, then, is the 'narrator' to whom Petronius abdicates his satirical role.

On the (supposed) target of Petronius' attack, Walsh argues that it could not have been Nero, or his court, since the author was heavily involved in its worst excesses.[46] This argument seems convincing, given the lack of direct moralising in the *Cena*, but fails to take the evidence from Tacitus and Plutarch into account. Assuming, but not conceding, that Petronius was a master of *dissimulatio vel vitiorum imitatione* who feigned vice while secretly mocking Nero, could the *Cena* be seen as a direct attack on the Neronian Age? Could Trimalchio be seen as Nero, the diners his courtiers?

Trimalchio's power-play and his ensuing domination of the diners certainly echoes Nero's domination of his courtiers. The atmosphere of the *Cena*, with its

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43 Rimmel 2005:164.

44 George 1966:349. *Cf.* Sullivan 1963:89: 'Encolpius … is deliberately and consistently revealed as an inadequate moral, or even aesthetic, commentator'.

45 See Walsh 1974:188; Harrison 2008:215.

46 Walsh 1974:185. But who else would have the necessary knowledge about the excesses of the regime? Surely someone who had a hand in planning these excesses would be in the perfect position to deliver commentary on them?

trapped, paranoid and nauseous diners, is reminiscent of the paranoia of Nero's court. Yet Rudich points out:

> … in order to work, parody / travesty must exhibit meaningful resemblance to the original in manner or matter, but this is not the case with Trimalchio and Nero: the two are vastly different not only in status, but in appearance and character. Furthermore, given Petronius' position at the court, such transparent procedure would have been suicidal.[47]

The reader, however, could suspect that Trimalchio's estate is a travesty of Nero's empire and court.[48] Perhaps this is the key to understanding Petronius' commentary: Trimalchio's differences from Nero could provide the author with plausible deniability, while the similarity of their estates / courts would allow the satirist to make a point about his own society. Petronius, then, could be commenting on the fatuousness of life in the court of an absolute monarch (using his own experiences under Nero as a model). Such an interpretation need rely on Rudich's assessment of Petronius being true.[49]

Petronius' use of an impotent first-person narrator and the creation of a meta-text in the mind of the reader have a dual effect. The reader is placed, by the use of first-person narration, in Encolpius' shoes: the reader experiences the action of the *Cena* in the same way as Encolpius. However, Petronius' creation of a meta-text also allows the reader to gain insights into the disjoint between appearance and reality — insight that Encolpius for the most part does not share. This creates an interesting situation of doublethink: the reader knows how flawed the mechanics of the dinner are, but is unable to do anything but go along for the ride.

Although Trimalchio and Nero are vastly different, the power dynamics between Trimalchio and his guests, and between Nero and his courtiers, are similar: the guests / courtiers are dominated by the host / emperor, and are unable to perceive his moral failings. Moreover, the host / emperor is just as impotent as his guests are: like Trimalchio, he is unable to control time and escape death. Petronius' use of irony exposes this difference between appearance and reality and, as a consequence, the terrible irony of being trapped in such a flawed and depressing system.

Thus, the real target of Petronius' satire is the author himself: like the reader, he knows how deeply flawed and ironical his situation at court is, but, like

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47 Rudich 1997:238.

48 *Ibid*. 246.

49 I.e. that Petronius was practising *dissimulatio*, secretly corrupting Nero while making fun of him. As mentioned above, Rudich's reliance on the extract from Plutarch only provides tenuous evidence, specifically since one could interpret the passage more moderately as an example of Petronius' use of simple κολακεία.

Encolpius, he is impotent and cannot escape. 'Society is pathetic', Petronius seems to say, 'but we are more pathetic for being unable to escape it'. Indeed, 'under the stress of Petronius' precarious existence [at court], self-irony was one of the few effective weapons at his disposal against fear and anxiety.'[50]

Admittedly, the *Cena* does not propose a solution to the problems faced by an individual trapped in such an environment. Petronius does not use laughter as a political symbol for dissent and revolution, as Bakhtin suggests. Rather, laughter becomes the symbol of the author and the reader's entrapment in a deeply flawed, hollow society. Yet, laughter also provides some liberation, freeing the author and reader from the *Angst* of living in such a society. Here is the change in perspective that Petronius wants to encourage: he uses laughter as a means of mental escape from a milieu that he cannot otherwise physically escape.

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[50] Rudich; 1997:206.

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