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Bookending the Cena Trimalchionis: Parallelism in Satyrca 78

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In the final scene of the *Cena Trimalchionis*, Petronius re-introduces elements that first appeared when Encolpius and his friends first entered the dining room, thereby bookending this episode of the *Satyrice*. Parallelism within the *Cena Trimalchionis* has long been recognized by scholars,¹ but in this closing passage of the *Cena*, Petronius re-incorporates certain elements in a mirror-image form. This narrative structure not only signals to readers that our time with Trimalchio is coming to an end, but it also allows Petronius to restate and wrap up some of the major themes from this episode of his work.

In the concluding scenes of the *Cena*, Stichus brings Trimalchio's purple-bordered toga and burial shroud to his master, who admonishes him to safeguard these items or risk being burned alive (78.1).² This passage bookends Encolpius' entrance to the dining room back in chapter 30 by recalling the naked slave who was facing punishment for losing the steward's purple-dyed dinner clothes, which he had received as a birthday present. Although the color purple appears occasionally during the *Cena Trimalchionis*, purple-dyed clothing shows up only in sections 30 and 78.³ Thus, we can discern a link between the two sections: in s. 30, we encounter a slave facing punishment for negligence with the steward's (*dispensator* in Latin) purple dyed clothes; this scenario is recalled again in s. 78 when Trimalchio (himself a former *dispensator*, according to the biographical paintings in s. 29.4) threatens a slave with punishment, should the slave prove negligent with his purple-dyed clothes. However, Petronius inverts the details between these two scenes. In s. 30, the (missing) purple-dyed clothing,

¹ For example, John Bodel outlined the major structural parallels of the entire *Cena* (Bodel, 1999, p. 45), Thomas K. Hubbard wrote an in-depth study of the *Satyrice*'s structure in 1986, and William Arrowsmith noted the repeated use of a trumpeter at the beginning and end of the *Cena* to underscore its death theme (Arrowsmith, 1966, p. 307).

² References to the *Cena Trimalchionis* come from Smith's 1975 edition of the text. All translations are my own.

³ Trimalchio does wear a purple striped napkin (*mappa*) around his neck (32.2), but despite this use, it is hard to see a napkin as clothing, since Encolpius calls it a napkin, and it is part of his overall appearance that drew laughter from some guests.

intended for use at dinner parties, was presented to the steward as a birthday gift. In s. 78, the (physically present) purple-dyed clothing, intended for use on Trimalchio's death-day, is presented at dinner party that has become more like a *silicernium* (i.e., the grave-side feast consumed on the day of a funeral).⁴ In this way, Petronius bookends the beginning and the end of the *Cena*. The references to purple-dyed clothes and threats of punishment against the slaves coming from *dispensators* link the two scenes, while the inversions (naked man/empty clothes, day of birth/end of life, dinner party/funeral feast) hint that the entrance to the dining room will soon become an exit from it.

Axes are another repeated element in the *Cena*. They make only two appearances in the story: first in chapter 30, when Encolpius and his friends are about to enter the dining room, and again in chapter 78, when the *vigiles* use them to bring an end to the dinner party. In their first appearance, Petronius specifically draws readers' attention to the axes through Encolpius' reaction to them: *Et quod praecipue miratus sum, in postibus triclinii fasces erant cum securibus fixi...* ("And what I found particularly remarkable was that there were fasces with axes fixed to the doorposts of the dining room..." 30.1). Axes attached to fasces were a symbol of a magistrate's power of life and death, and they were usually assigned to military commanders, and holders of high office—but not to *sevirs*.⁵ The axes in this scene are an attempt by Trimalchio to associate himself with a higher status and authority than he actually has. They are, in effect, a showy but hollow claim of authority.⁶ Moreover, the axes and fasces typically adorn the doorposts of tombs, making their appearance in Trimalchio's home suggestive of a visit to

⁴ For Roman funeral rites, see Toynbee, 1971, pp. 50-51.

⁵ Prag, 2006, p. 540.

⁶ Prag, *ibid.*, notes that several known monuments commemorate *sevirs* with images of rods and axes, so Trimalchio is not the only Roman *sevir* who tried associating himself with this authority

the underworld.⁷ Later, when the *vigiles* break into the dining room, axes are a mirror image of their first appearance: from a mere decorative device and a hollow assertion of authority, they now assume a practical purpose, wielded by people authorized to use them. Indeed, Petronius specifically draws readers' attention to the *vigiles*' lawful power to use them: *effregerunt ianuam subito et cum aqua securibusque tumultuari suo iure coeperunt* ("suddenly they broke down the door, and with water and axes, they began, in accordance with their authority, to create a ruckus," 78.7). With Trimalchio in the process of acting out his own funeral when the *vigiles* burst in, the axes in this scene bring the underworld motif, first introduced by the rods and axes in s. 30, to a crashing end, and thus signal an end to the *Cena*.

In both the purple-dyed clothing and the axes, Petronius brings together some of the major themes of the *Cena*. The clothing, for example, physically embodies themes of wealth and poverty (the steward's clothes were worth only ten sesterces, while Trimalchio specifically points out that his were made of the finest wools and likely quite expensive), life and death (the steward's clothes were a birthday gift, Trimalchio's were for his funeral), as well as satiety and hunger (the steward's clothes were meant to be worn while he feasted; Trimalchio's would be worn when he no longer had any need for food—though he specifically admonishes Stichus to make sure they do not themselves become food for mice and moths.⁸ The axes, when attached to fasces, represent the power of military commanders and magistrates to impose capital punishment, so their appearance in s. 30 subtly suggests the theme of death and cues the reader to expect the repetition of this theme throughout the *Cena*. But Petronius inverts this theme when

⁷ Prag, 2006, p. 541.

⁸ Petronius writes: 'Vide tu' inquit 'Stiche, ne ista mures tangant aut tineae' 78.? Here, the verb *tangere* would not mean "to touch" because mice or moths simply touching the clothes would not damage them. Rather, the verb is used here with the meaning "to taste" or "to eat."

the *vigiles* use axes to break into the dining room and free Encolpius and his companions from a mock funeral feast and metaphorical underworld. By reincorporating objects representative of these key themes, and then inverting their use in the final scene of the *Cena*, Petronius signals to his readers that, like the dinner party itself, these themes have reached their conclusion.

The parallels found in sections 30 and 78 bookend the beginning and end of the *Cena*: elements that first appear when the story took readers into the dining room re-appear only when the dinner party is about to end. This symmetry of structure may well have served a practical purpose in Petronius' day: ancient books were not neatly segmented into discrete sub-divisions, such as sections or chapters, to help readers discern one episode from another.⁹ Thus, the repetition of elements such as the purple-dyed clothing, the slaves threatened with punishment, and the axes, likely signaled to attentive readers a beginning and end of the *Cena* episode. But by presenting the details surrounding these elements in a mirror-image form, Petronius not only signals that the entrance in s. 30 will become an exit in s.78, but he also draws the major thematic threads of the *Cena* to a close. In this way, Petronius gives a structural and thematic unity to the *Cena* within the larger context of the *Satyrica*.

⁹ Luke Pitcher offers a useful and succinct discussion of the difference between ancient and modern editorial conventions than can be given here: Pitcher, 2009, pp. 1-2.

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Translation: Satyrice 68

Then, having come to a short pause, Trimalchio ordered a another round to be brought in; whereupon the all of the servants took our tables out and brought in new ones. And they sprinkled sawdust mixed with saffron and cinnabar, and—something I had never seen before—powdered mica. At once, Trimalchio quipped, "I would be content with this serving; for indeed, you have here another round. But if you have something to top it off, then bring it in."

Meanwhile, an Alexandrian boy who was serving hot water, began to imitate a nightingale, immediately followed by Trimalchio, who exclaimed, "Change your tune!" And behold—we were treated to another joke: the slave who sat at Habinna's feet, ordered, I'm sure, by his master, suddenly proclaimed in a sing-song voice...