

Trimalchio's Aggrandizing Entrance: Characterization in Satyricon 33-34

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CHRIS MILLER – 1806060

Petronius establishes some key elements of Trimalchio's character through the freedman's entrance and first interactions with his guests in *Satyrice* 33-34. The construction of his language and actions portray Trimalchio's attempts to elevate himself above his freedman status by mimicking the insignia and mannerisms of Roman elites, as well as through his conspicuous displays of wealth. But his low birth, unrefined up-bringing, and ignoble wealth all leave him trapped in a social underworld, where he farcically lords over his fellow-freedmen. The traits established at the outset of the dinner party are part of a consistent pattern of behavior that ultimately points toward the necessity for Trimalchio to die before finally achieving the honours he seeks.

In his first words to his guests, Trimalchio tells them that it was not pleasing for him to join them in the dining room, but thought he should not delay any further, and so denied himself "all enjoyment" by coming to his own dinner party. (*"amici," inquit, "nondum mihi suave erat in triclinium venire, se ne ditius absentivus morae vobis essem, omnem voluptatem mihi negavi,"* 33.1). ¹His enjoyment, we soon learn, was a board game, which he then resumes playing, thus making himself physically present but effectively indifferent to everyone in the dining room. He compounds his ill-treatment of his guests only a few moments later, telling them that he gave yesterday's dinner companions a lesser wine, even though they were "much more respectable" guests (*heri non tam bonum [vinum] posui, et multo honestiores cenabat*, 34.7). Some scholars have taken these statements to indicate Trimalchio's social ineptness: Edward Courtney calls Trimalchio's first words to his guests a "societal gaffe that, while professing to oblige his guests, ... actually puts them in an awkward position."² Gareth Schmeling says Trimalchio's statement,

¹ Quotations from and references to the *Cena Trimalchionis* are based on Smith's 1975 edition of the text. All translations are my own.

² Courtney, 2001, p. 83.

nondum mihi suave erat in triclinium venire, is an attempt to impress his guests with an "elaborate expression," but instead he only embarrasses them, then later deflates them by comparing them negatively to the previous day's guests.³ But this apparent rudeness may not be the embarrassing gaffe these scholars claim it to be. Rather, it can be seen as an affectation aimed at inflating his own status.

In the first act of apparent rudeness, Trimalchio is unapologetic as he makes the guests wait for him. A short time later, however, he is perfectly willing to beg his guests' pardon for his absence, when he rejoins them after stomach trouble had caused him to leave the dining room: *..Trimalchio intravit et... "ignoscite mihi," inquit, "amici, multis iam diebus venter mihi non respondet..."* ("...Trimalchio entered and ... said, 'Forgive me, friends. My stomach hasn't been working properly for several days now...' 47.1-2). Clearly, Trimalchio is aware of, and willing to adhere to, basic rules of etiquette. So his language and tone when he first addresses his guests in s. 33.1-2 should not be seen as arising from social ineptness or rudeness. Rather, Trimalchio makes his guests wait for him much as a patron would make his clients wait during the morning *salutatio*. As Richard. P. Saller notes, it was a mark of clients' lower status to wait for their patrons (typically in the atrium or, worse yet, outside his house⁴); despite the obvious difference in status, however, patrons nonetheless addressed their clients as *amici*,⁵ which is exactly how Trimalchio addresses them, after making wait for his appearance. Thus, his entrance apes a social custom that his guests, the freedmen in particular, would already know well. In this way, Trimalchio subtly asserts a socially superior status over his guests.⁶ The tone of his first words to his guests reinforce

³ Schmeling, 2011, p. 116 & 124.

⁴ Saller, 1982, p. 11.

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ Rankin, 1971, p.41.

this position: much like a patron deigning to receive clients, his words frame his arrival as if it were the fulfillment of a social obligation to lower status people. Moreover, his comment about hosting more respectable guests the previous evening informs Encolpius and the other diners that he is accustomed to hosting members of respectable society, and thus hints that he is part of that society. (The truth of this statement is, of course, never established). In doing so, he subtly elevates himself above his guests.⁷ Trimalchio's actions and statements here are not gaffes or mere rudeness; rather they are meant to demonstrate some undefined social superiority over his guests.

Despite Trimalchio's seemingly insulting language, however, there is no indication in the text that the guests were embarrassed or took Trimalchio's words badly. Indeed, even as he ignores his guests and continues with his game, Encolpius expresses not annoyance but admiration for the game: "...I noted the most elegant thing of all: for, instead of white and black playing pieces, he used gold and silver denarii" (...*notavique rem omnium delicatissimam. pro calculis enim albis ac nigris aureos argenteosque habebat denarius*, 33.2). Encolpius seems more put out moments later when he suspects his egg has an addled yolk (*ego quidem paene proieci partem meam, nam videbatur mihi iam in pullum coisse*, 33.7) than he did by anything Trimalchio said. He continues to talk down to his guests later in the *Cena*, saying, for example, *vos rogo, amici, ut vobis salviter sit* (again we see the haughty impersonal construction, similar to that used in 33.1). *nam ego quoque tam fui quam vos estis, sed virtute mea ad hoc perveni* ("I beg you, friends, that it be pleasant for you. For I was also much as you are now, but by my own virtue, I reached this level" 75.8). These sorts of statements are consistent with the other affectations Encolpius has already noted, such as the axes and fasces on the entrance to the dining room implying some sort of magistrate's authority (30.1) the purple-striped napkin Trimalchio wears to suggest senatorial rank;

⁷ Goldman, 2008, p. 60.

or the star-studded ring that appears at first glance to be all gold, thus suggesting equestrian rank (32.2-3). Later, Trimalchio reveals that he even plans to be depicted in a purple-striped toga on his tomb, implying senatorial rank, (71.9) and to wear the same garment when he is carried out in his funeral procession (78.1). Trimalchio is, of course, entitled to none of the honours implied by these affectations.⁸ By having his character speaking and behaving in ways that suggest, but do not explicitly claim (at least not in life), a defined status superior to that of a freedman, Petronius establishes Trimalchio's trait of self-aggrandizing status seeking.

Trimalchio's entrance to the dinner party also establishes his desire to showcase his status through his wealth, particularly through prominent displays of silver. When he makes his entrance into the dining room, Trimalchio picks his teeth with a silver quill (33.1); when slaves are clearing away dishes, a silver dish falls to the floor, and Trimalchio has a slave boy punished for picking it up (34.2); he uses silver (as well as gold) as playing pieces in a board game (33.2); he has a mobile-jointed silver skeleton, which he sets in various poses as if it were a doll (33.8). Trimalchio clearly has a love for silver—he even says so later in the *Cena: in argento plane studiosus sum* ("I am particularly eager for silver," 52.1). But long before the reader reaches that passage, Petronius has already demonstrated not only Trimalchio's love for silver, but also his love of using it to display his wealth as conspicuously as possible. Even before the dinner party begins, in fact, we find him in the public baths, urinating into a silver chamber pot (27.5-6). Trimalchio uses silver to show others that he is so wealthy, that he can afford to use silver for basic bodily functions such as picking his teeth or receiving his urine; he can use it as a literal play thing, both as counters on a board game, and as a toy skeleton; and he can even throw it away if he pleases.

⁸ Courtney, 2001, pp. 79 & 82-83.

What purpose does this this unrestrained parading, even waste, of his wealth serve? H.D. Rankin argues it is indicative of Trimalchio's lavish personality:

Trimalchio wishes to be like a prince, who can spend lavishly and not count the cost. He realises his desire for self-assertion by conspicuous expenditure from apparently inexhaustible wealth, rather than by the oppression of fellow creatures.⁹

The "self-assertion" driving Trimalchio's reckless spending, Rankin argues, is his desire to live as fully as possible before he dies. That is also why Trimalchio is often shown threatening his slaves, but, as Rankin says, "always allows the offenders to go free": having come from slavery, Trimalchio not only empathizes with his household slaves, but he ultimately chooses to pursue immediate pleasures, rather than waste time asserting his authority over his social inferiors.¹⁰ But such a characterization ignores Trimalchio's repeated focus on wealth for its status-display purposes. Like the other affectations already noted, such as entering the triclinium as if a patron, or wearing a purple-striped napkin to resemble a senator, Trimalchio's conspicuous displays of silver suggest a social division between himself and his guests. That is why Trimalchio does, in fact punish at least one slave in the *Cena*: the boy who tried to pick up a silver dessert dish that had fallen to the floor is, on Trimalchio's orders, subjected to blows, and forced to drop the dish back onto the ground (*inter tumultum cum forte paropsis excidisset et puer iacentem sustulisset, animadvertit Trimalchio colaphisque obiurgari puerum ac proicere rursus paropsidem iussit*, 34.2-3). It is important to note here that the boy was not punished because he dropped the dish; the dish fell to the ground by chance (*cum forte paropsis excidisset*) amidst the commotion of the tables being cleared. The boy was punished for interfering with the unsubtle—perhaps even

⁹ Rankin, 1971, 28.

¹⁰ Rankin, 1971, p. 27.

contrived—display of sweeping away the dish with the other detritus on the floor (*insecutus est <supel>lecticarius argentumque inter reliqua purgamenta scopis coepit verrere*, 34.4).

As this incident shows, Trimalchio insists on removing any ambiguity about the extent of his wealth. Trimalchio even goes so far as to inscribe his name on his dishes along with the weight of the silver content in them (31.10) and weighs his wife's gold jewelry in front of his guests, so there can be no doubt as to their value (67.8).¹¹ For the same reason, his wine bears a label indicating it is Falernian and of Opimian vintage. The guests cannot be left to sample the wine and assess it; instead, he insists on informing them explicitly of its superior quality (34.7).¹² And his efforts seem to pay off. In addition to Encolpius' already-noted approbation of Trimalchio's expensive board game, the weight of the egg-spoons, likely made of silver, also makes an impression on Encolpius: "we took egg-spoons weighing no less than half a pound..." (*accipimus nos coclearia non minus selibras pendentia...* 33.6). Normally such spoons were small and light, so their weight in this passage is yet another conspicuous display of wealth.¹³ To Trimalchio, wealth serves to demonstrate one's value as a person, and the more one has, the more one is worth as a person.¹⁴ As he says later in the *Cena*: "if you have a penny, you're worth a penny" (*assem habeas, assem valeas*, 77.6). Trimalchio displays silver and other luxury goods so blatantly in sections 33 and 34 as yet another way to establish his superiority over other freedmen.

The elements of affected superiority and conspicuously-displayed wealth converge when Trimalchio recites (supposedly extemporaneously) an epigram on the need to enjoy life while one

¹¹ Horsfall, 1989b, p. 198; Hales, 2009, p. 178.

¹² As Peter Bicknell notes, this wine was quite probably not Falernian of Opimian vintage (Bicknell, 1968, p. 348). Trimalchio's insistence on presenting it as such is all the more telling: he simply must showcase his wealth, even if it means he is deceiving his guests – or being deceived himself, if actually believed the wine was Falernian of Opimian vintage.

¹³ Schmeling, 2011, p. 118.

¹⁴ Courtney, 2001, p. 120.

can, while posing a silver skeleton on the table (34.9-10). The tradition of death at the banquet had an enduring appeal in Greco-Roman literature, offering a dramatic juxtaposition of conviviality in the face of the inevitable end of earthly delights.¹⁵ Petronius incorporates this tradition into the *Cena*, while simultaneously using it to highlight Trimalchio's status-seeking characteristics. In this passage, Petronius uses the epigram to establish Trimalchio's educational and cultural pretensions, which show up again in other passages of the *Cena*.¹⁶ Like his axes and fasces, his patron-like arrival, and his purple-striped napkin, Trimalchio's poetic recitation is an affectation used to imply social superiority his guests. Improvised poetry was admired in the Roman empire, yet the lines in Trimalchio's mouth are merely an attempt, as Nicholas Horsfall said, to ape the "cultivated art of extemporising verses."¹⁷ They contain grammatical errors¹⁸ and they come across as "mediocre" and "sub-literary."¹⁹ As for the silver skeleton, it was an established part of Roman banqueting culture no later than early in Augustus' reign.²⁰ However, such accoutrements seem to have been in decline among elites throughout the first century, though they still had currency among more distant provincial societies.²¹ If this is the case, then Trimalchio's presentation of the silver skeleton might already have been passé. Thus, the skeleton is an expensive and showy affectation that Trimalchio borrows from his social superiors. Like his poetry, however, it might impress other freedmen (as indicated in 35.1), but not the refined nobles he imitates. In this scene, then, the skeleton and accompanying poem are not just a comically lackluster imitation of elite banqueting tradition; they also show Trimalchio has the financial means to imitate those he aspires

¹⁵ Jazdzewska, 2013, p. 315; Horsfall, 1989b, p. 199.

¹⁶ For example, he spouts a few words of Virgil, 39.3; he brags about being studious and having a Latin and a Greek library, 48.4; he makes further attempts at improvised verse, 55.3.

¹⁷ Horsfall, 1989a, p. 79.

¹⁸ Schemling, 2011, p. 126

¹⁹ Courtney, 2001, p. 85.

²⁰ Dunbabin, 1986, p. 232-233.

²¹ Dunbabin, 1986, p. 234.

to be like, but lacks the necessary education and upbringing to achieve his desired station in life.

As John Bodel aptly stated:

Denied the respectability to which he feels his wealth entitles him, he lives in a peculiar social limbo, like the disembodied spirits of the underworld, who have the form but not the substance of real men.²²

The combination of the silver skeleton and the bad epigram showcase Trimalchio's wealth and societal pretensions, while revealing that they only serve to impress other freedmen. Trimalchio spares no expense in his quest for status, but ultimately can only parade it before his social equals.

Even if he had obtained the necessary education, Trimalchio's quest for greater social status would still be doomed by the nature of his fortune, and by his servile birth. Trimalchio's pride in the acquisition of his fortune is entirely at odds with the mindset of Roman nobles. His social superiors saw Trimalchio's route to riches—hard work and mercantile enterprise—as beneath the dignified respectability of income from landed estates.²³ Trimalchio is aware of the need for land in order to be a proper gentleman, and he stresses the extent of his estates throughout the *Cena* (e.g., he owns land that stretches from Terracina and Tarentum, and his desire to buy Sicily, 48.2-3; the long list of estates and property read out by a steward, 53.1-10).²⁴ Though Roman nobles had no qualms about adding lands to their existing estates, Trimalchio's acquisition of land is entirely tied up with pride in his material gains, shown for example, in his lavish displays of silver, or in his long and bragging speech about his mercantile accomplishments (76.1-10). His social outlook is utterly incompatible with the lofty disdain for financial gain affected by the class he

²² Bodel, 1999, p. 46-47

²³ D'Arms, 1981, p. 9.

²⁴ Goldman, 2008, p. 60.

emulates.²⁵ Thus, Trimalchio remains trapped in a social underworld. Like his silver skeleton, he is socially dead to the nobility who occupy the upper world of Roman society, despite his upper-class pretensions and his glittering wealth.

Moreover, as a freedman, Trimalchio is consigned to a dead-end social strata. As Goldman notes, free birth to an esteemed family (preferably in an important city) along with respectable wealth, and the educational refinements of a proper upbringing, were key concepts underlying Roman social honour.²⁶ Henrik Mouritsen, in his study of freedmen's epitaphs, wrote:

What united all freedmen was their common experience – and the stigma – of servitude, which stayed with them throughout their lives and defined their place in society. ... Their concern with status, often dismissed as an obsession with empty honours, was a natural corollary to their social marginality.²⁷

Trimalchio's only escape from this social marginality is death, which is why he is so obsessed with it. From the very beginning of the *Cena Trimalchionis*, when we learn that he has a clock and trumpeter to mark the passing moments of his life (26.9) to the final mock funeral (78.1-6), the theme of death repeats constantly. Only death will finally allow him to have a lavish funeral in which he will be carried out in triumph-like splendour, as the whole city offers prayers for him (*ego gloriosus volo efferrī, ut totus mihi populus bene imprecetur*, 78.2).²⁸ Death alone will allow him to present himself publicly with all the pomp and honour he desires. The silver skeleton emphasizes the underworld-like existence that Trimalchio must endure, until he can finally occupy a splendid tomb that will allow him, as he ironically puts it, to live even after he dies (71.6).

²⁵ D'Arms, 1981, p. 6.

²⁶ Goldman, 2008, p. 59.

²⁷ Mouritsen, 2005, p. 60.

²⁸ Hales, 2009, p. 197.

Trimalchio's first interactions with his guests are crucial for establishing traits that will recur throughout the narrative. By aping his social superiors in his language, mannerism and his displays of wealth, sections 33-34 of the *Satyria* clearly lay out Trimalchio's assertion of social superiority over his guests. Indeed, his guests, even Encolpius (at least in the initial stages of the *Cena*) seem unperturbed by this behaviour: in his own home, Trimalchio is to be the focus of attention. But outside that environment, he is unable to convert his imitation of elites into a real change of social status, irrespective of his wealth. Because of servile birth and mercantile past, Trimalchio, like all freedmen, has little hope of moving beyond his station. He can only imitate the outward appearance of the elite members of society, but he never manages to capture the same substance, as his bad poetry reveals. Until he dies, Trimalchio will remain trapped in a metaphorical underworld, a living counterpart to his silver skeleton.

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